

Salem Speedway announces expansion

Written by George Browning

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Both the new Salem airport project and the local economy may get much-needed boosts thanks to an announcement by Salem Speedway Owner Owen Thompson at the Dec. 16 meeting of the Salem Board of Aviation Commissioners.

Thompson announced plans for an upcoming project at the speedway that is estimated to cost more than \$300,000 and will bring a variety of different races to the community.

Thompson said in a phone interview Thursday morning that the plan is to add a small oval inside the existing pits.

"We will have an X in the middle for all kinds of figure eights and road race type stuff," he said. "It will have many, many functions built into it."

Salem Speedway General Manager Richard Deaton is an expert on the track's history. He said these are historic changes.

"There have been some highlights and some things that have changed about the speedway throughout the years, but this is probably going to be one of the biggest changes that has taken place since the speedway was built," Deaton said. "It's the biggest undertaking in the 64-year history of the track."

He compared the changes to the ones that took place when Owen and his wife Beverly bought the track in 1995.

This is just phase one of Thompson's plan. Each year over the next three years the speedway plans to add a new facet with the culmination being a drag strip when the old airport's purchase is official.

Phase two, which will take place in the off-season 2011, would include inserting a .44 mile dirt track inside the high-banked oval.

Phase three will be the drag strip at the current Salem Municipal Airport.

The totality of the project is expected to cost well over \$1 million.

The changes will not only draw a number of different type of race cars and drivers, but also a different kind of fan.

"We want to not only draw fans from the area, Louisville and Indianapolis, but from around the nation," Thompson said. "We want the fans that are coming in for the Brickyard or the Indianapolis 500 or even for the IRL races at Kentucky Speedway to have a reason to come to Salem and that reason will be three-day type of events with a type of racing for all fans."

With the changes, the type of racing that will be held at the speedway will include a large oval, road racing, go carts, entry level oval, figure 8 and mini sprints, both dirt and paved.

The type of cars on the circle tracks will include late models, sportsman, street stocks, bombers, front wheel drive, entry level, SCCA, sprints and midgets, go carts and motorcycles.

"There was a time when 5,000 people would visit on Sunday afternoon and be happy just watching one type of car race, but those days are passed.

Several locals were happy about Thompson's announcement. One of those was air board member Bob Woodward.

"It was an exciting announcement," he said. "I knew what was happening, but it's nice to get it out to the public."

Woodward said the news only strengthens his belief that the new airport will help to boost economic development. He said that has been his motivation all along.

"A lot of the people don't realize we are doing this for economic growth, not necessarily a new airport," Woodward said. "That has been a big factor in this – what we can do to boost the economy. I know the new airport is not going to save the county, but I think selling the old airport can help. That's why we've been dedicated to making sure whoever buys the old airport

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is committed to helping the economy and I believe Owen Thompson is going to do that.

“If we don't build an airport we aren't going to have any hope, to me, this gives us some hope.”

Salem Mayor Dave Bower agrees. He said city residents should be pleased that it looks like a new airport is a reality without spending any of the city taxpayers' money.

“I think it's good that we have something happening,” Bower said. “Hopefully, that will provide an opportunity to provide jobs in our community and in the long term, I think it will. We're excited about it.”

There wasn't a groundbreaking ceremony planned at the time this story was written.