

Salem Speedway looks to acquire current Salem Municipal Airport site

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Plans for expansion to include drag strip, road course...

by **G. Wright, Staff Writer**

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Much discussion and disagreement has swirled around the plans for the construction of a new Salem Airport facility in Washington County. Questions have arisen regarding the need for such a facility and the practicality of funding it, but the reported struggles between the Salem Common Council and the Board of Aviation Commissioners may all but vanish with a new development which occurred last week.

Salem Mayor David Bower, Salem Speedway Owner, Owen Thompson, and Salem Board of Aviation Commissioners (BOAC) President Bill Barnett confirmed that they met on Thursday morning, May 8 to discuss a variety of subjects including the possibility of the Salem Speedway acquiring the current location of the Salem Municipal Airport once the new airport facility is completed.

According to Bower, Barnett, and Thompson, the bulk of the discussion focused on Thompson presenting a concept to transform the Salem Speedway, Salem Municipal Airport and other unspecified properties to the west of Salem into a world class Motorplex.. Thompson confirmed that his concept includes participation from an unnamed local Sprint Cup affiliate, along with Lucas Oil Company, Haas/CNC Racing, Toyota, and Indiana University/Purdue University, Indianapolis (IUPUI). In addition to IUPUI, several other non-automotive/racing sponsors were named.

Although no agreements have been finalized, Bower indicated that Thompson's proposal may well be the missing ingredient to make the new airport facility possible. Thompson said that his concept calls for the present airport facility to be converted to a drag strip complex when the new airport facility is functional. In addition, Thompson's plans call for a additional road-type racing capacity in the infield of the half mile oval and adjacent locations. Thompson went on to elaborate on plans for a research and development center and an automotive design/engineering facility operated by IUPUI.

In a telephone interview, Thompson was quite emphatic that the whole concept of a motorplex in Washington County is contingent upon the willingness of the BOAC and the City of Salem to facilitate an arrangement that will allow Salem Speedway to acquire the current airport facility and various other properties at a fair market price and in a timely manner.

"The various sponsors and anticipated participants in this project want to make sure that when they commit, it will not be the middle of the next decade before the old airport is available," cautioned Thompson.

In a published interview earlier this year, Mayor Bower had stated that if some local business person came forward with a plan to use the current airport facility for the betterment of the community, he would do whatever was in his power to make it happen.

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“We may need to get Baron Hill, Denny Oxley, and our United States Senators involved in this project to make sure that the Federal Aviation Administration moves ahead with its approval plans for the new airport as quickly as possible.” Bower noted. “This is too important to have someone in Chicago or Washington dragging their feet.”

The potential benefits to Salem, Washington County and Southern Indiana region if such a project is completed would have a tremendous impact on the area.

Barnett indicated that the idea of IUPUI developing an automotive technical center incorporated into the facility is an exciting facet of the plan. The proposed complex would include a racing industry research and development, and testing facility as well.

A facility like the one proposed by Thompson would provide an opportunity for young people interested in automotive technology in general and racing technology specifically to come to this facility and learn every aspect from driving techniques to technical training in areas from design to maintenance.

Speculation about this project and the involvement of big name NASCAR drivers has swirled around the Salem Speedway for years but it finally looks like it is coming to fruition in a more spectacular manner than rumors would have indicated, if all the pieces of this puzzle fall into place.

According to Thompson’s plan, when completed the motorplex will include the following:

- 5/8 mile high banked oval race track.
- 1320 foot tractor pulling arena.
- 3300 foot drag strip with return lane.
- 1 mile road race course.
- Racing museum.
- 3000 seat concert stand.
- Luxury suites.
- IUPUI technical center.
- Corporate test and product development center.
- Design and machining center.

Thompson said that a formal announcement of the project will be forthcoming in the very near future.