

Dixon racetrack rejected by voters

By Bill Lindelof - Bee Staff Writer

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Kristin Finkel, who works at Golden Gate Fields racetrack, rallies Dixon track backers in that town Tuesday before they began canvassing voters. Sacramento Bee/Autumn Cruz

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In the end small-town politics trumped Magna Entertainment's highly financed effort to bring a state-of-the-art entertainment complex and thoroughbred racing to Dixon.

Magna out-financed opponents of the racetrack by 30-to-1, but the money -- and a bevy of last-minute enticements for the Solano County town -- didn't win over residents who feared how big-time racing might change the rural feel of the farming town of 17,000 off Interstate 80.

Marime Burton, chairwoman of Dixon Citizens for Quality Growth Against Measures M, N, O, and P, had predicted a photo finish. In the end, it wasn't close Tuesday, as her side led all night.

"We are a small town," she said. "Many of us have been here a long time. Many others moved here specifically because of the kind of place Dixon is. To be faced with a dramatic change ... was not what we wanted."

She said the money Magna had for the campaign made inroads, but not enough.

"It's a thrill," she said.

Magna Entertainment, a Canadian-based company, for years has wanted to build a thoroughbred racetrack and training center on land it owns in the northeast part of Dixon.

Erin Lehane, spokeswoman for the pro-track Don't Let Dixon Down group, said Magna officials would take a month off and come back to Dixon to see if there was a way to revive the track proposal.

"Of course we are very disappointed, but we respect the voters of Dixon," Lehane said. "This is still something Magna would like to talk to the people of Dixon about. They would like to see if there is a way to repackage this to make this fit in Dixon."

She said Magna made "great gains" with the people of Dixon and Magna hopes to increase those gains. But first Magna wants to take a month to reflect.

Asked if that means another election, she said "that would be up to the people."

Voters were asked to vote on four measures. All four had to pass for the racetrack to be built, but all four appeared to have failed to gain approval.

With all nine precincts reporting, Measure M results were 2,284 (46.7 percent) yes to 2,612 (53.4 percent) no; Measure N, 2,311 (47.1 percent) yes to 2,595 (52.9 percent) no; Measure O, 2,316 (47.2 percent) yes to 2,591 (52.80 percent) no; and Measure P, 2,310 (47.1 percent) yes to 2,600 (53.0 percent) no.

There are 277 absentee ballots yet to be counted and 174 provisional ballots, but track supporters would have to garner almost 90 percent of them to gain the lead.

On Tuesday, Magna supporters came from other tracks to campaign.

Wearing bright "Team Seabiscuit" T-shirts, the volunteers ranged from grooms to track presidents.

"This track will be good for you and your city," said Patricia Rivera, who has worked in janitorial services at Golden Gate Fields in Albany for 10 years.

The fate of the proposed development on 260 acres at I-80 and Pedrick Road was put to 7,400 registered voters.

In addition to the track, a second phase would entail commercial, retail, entertainment, office and hotel facilities.

A racetrack plan was approved by the Dixon City Council in October.

But opponents gathered enough signatures to force Tuesday's special election.

A spirited campaign ensued with residents taking sides. Lawn signs peppered the town.

And Magna pulled out the checkbook to raise 30 times more campaign money than the opposition since the first of the year.

That kind of money allowed for events such as a campaign kickoff in February that drew 3,000.

And at a chamber of commerce social gathering more than 100 businesses attended to support the racetrack.

Election Day was not much different with the opposition quietly phoning voters and Magna taking to the streets with some noisy out-of-town help.

The effort to win approval for Dixon Downs brought out hundreds of volunteers from throughout Northern California.

Busloads of track personnel from Golden Gate Fields and Bay Meadows came to Dixon to help canvass precincts.

Tuesday morning, a life-size plastic horse rode around town on a flatbed trailer as campaign workers urged voters by bullhorn to vote.

The opposition telephoned and knocked on doors to get people to the polls.

"Compared to the other sides our army is pretty small," said opposition leader Burton. "But when you have more money, you spend more money."

In its literature, Magna said the track would help the city budget by bringing in sales tax revenue and also create jobs. Opponents said the track would back up traffic and ruin the small-town character of Dixon.

In February, the racetrack developer tried to counter concerns of longtime residents by sweetening the deal.

The company announced the racetrack infield would be converted into 14 acres of community athletic fields, open free of charge to community sports organizations.

Magna introduced "development covenants," to the original racetrack plan approved by the Dixon City Council.

In part they said there would never be slots or casino-style gambling at the site and another would limit events that might cause traffic and noise.

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