

RACE COMPLEX READY TO BREAK GROUND

BY James Burger
The Bakersfield Californian
December 13, 2006

As-yet-unnamed NASCAR track at I-5 and Enos Lane would replace old Mesa Marin

The first dirt will be turned in January on Kern County's new NASCAR raceway if the Kern County Planning Commission gives the project a nod tonight.



An artist's rendering of a new NASCAR raceway that could be built on Interstate 5 in Kern County.

The first rubber could be burned in spring 2008.

State and federal agencies have signed off on the project's environmental impacts on endangered species and air quality after a careful review, said county Planning Director Ted James.

And naysayers have not appeared to denounce the idea, he said.

So the two well-known Kern County families who are backing the new raceway have high hopes that tonight's hurdle won't be hard to clear.

The Collins family is county racing royalty. Marion Collins built nationally known Mesa Marin Raceway 30 years ago.

After Mesa Marin was sold and demolished in 2005, the Destefani farming family started talking to the Collinses about a new site on orchard land at Interstate 5 and Enos Lane.

Marion's son, Larry Collins, said the raceway project grew out of both families' love of racing.

"That was kind of the driving force -- the passion to keep the sport in our community," Collins said.

Construction of the new raceway was announced a year ago.

The hope at the time was racing could start in spring 2007.

But Larry Collins said the delays, as the environmental impacts of the project got a close look from regulators, turned out to be a blessing.

Designs for the project were refined and some of the best raceway builders in the nation were recruited to work on the Kern County site, he said.

The plan is for a half-mile banked oval racetrack with a 5,200-seat grandstand, more than 20 luxury suites, paved parking and large landscaped lawns perfect for concerts, group gatherings or pre-race festivities. Destefani patriarch Mel Destefani is already crafting a grand entrance corridor for the raceway by transplanting 100-year-old palm trees his family rescued from along Taft Highway where they were threatened by housing development.

Basically the track would be a modern reincarnation of Mesa Marin complete with a tunnel under the track to the infield.

Collins said he is looking forward to reconnecting with the fans and drivers, both local and national, who made Mesa Marin home.

Project vice president Brian Olsen said the new track would add a ton of extras to the tried-and-true 28- to 30-event annual schedule at Mesa Marin. The new track will have a one-eighth-mile drag strip.

And the main track would host events such as motorcycle racing and "drifting" events in addition to the street stock, late model and high school racing events that were Mesa Marin's bread and butter. Concession stands, offices and suites would be housed in a new five-story tower above the grandstands.

The track is currently named only "Kern County's New Home to NASCAR" because there is a hunt for a corporate sponsor who would buy the raceway's naming rights.

Olsen said the Collins-Destefani team has no problem with developers planning a larger, longer-track NASCAR raceway complex near Tulare.

"We hope that something like that can come into the valley," Olsen said. "Any time you add more tracks to the valley it only helps ours."

Collins said he and his family stuck with the smaller half-mile track concept because they wanted to keep a weekly schedule of racing events rather than hosting only a few major races each year.

"Bigger isn't always better," he said.