

By BRIAN ACKLEY
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Simon Crawford appreciates his recent promotion was a little like being picked as the proverbial captain of the Titanic, with one big difference. He took the rudder despite already knowing his vessel was destined to collide with an iceberg.

So, it doesn't come as a surprise to the affable General Manager of Buffalo Raceway when on any given race night, empty seats outnumber patrons about 20 to 1. Agriculture, in general, and horse racing in particular, are New York industries that have been viewed as favorably as Mario Cuomo at a GOP rally.

That is, until now. Whatever the motive – mainly Albany's inability to quench a revenue thirst bigger than Secretariat's 1973 win in the Belmont – Buffalo Raceway, and its companion track Batavia Downs are about to become Buffalo Niagara's fourth and fifth casinos.

And no, that's not new math. In fact, when Buffalo finally stops spinning its reels in the sands of inertia, whatever the city ends up with might be no less than the area's seventh Western New York based gambling hall. Add Fort Erie's track, and soon-to-be two casinos across the border, and the number swells to 10.

Long before the sparkly Seneca Niagara Casino blazed forward, the nation invested some \$4 million to convert its two high-stakes Bingo halls into full fledged mini-casinos, a move that went virtually unnoticed or unchallenged on the gambling radar screen. And, there is a strong possibility the Senecas will actually devote their energies next on a casino off Interstate 86 in Salamanca, where Seneca businesspeople have already invested millions of dollars in actual hotels, restaurants and retail operations.

Horse racing reaches into the quiet cul-de-sacs of Williamsville to the dustiest back roads of rural Western New York. This isn't about the forces of good versus evil here. The gambling vs. anti-gambling argument left the starting gate years ago. From horse owners to track workers to the suppliers of stable bedding, the industry is finally getting some help.

Hardly a new thought, serious discussions about what it would take to revive the business, specifically allowing slots, goes back almost a decade. Two years ago, it looked as though they were imminent, only to be held up by more state and legal wrangling.

“The 2001 agreement is what has kept everyone really into it,” Crawford said. “I don't think you would have seen Buffalo ...Batavia wouldn't have lasted ...Yonkers ... All these places. The carrot is still dangling out there for us to continue.

“It's not for the track's sake, it's for the thousands of people's sake,” Crawford continued. “You can pump all the money you want into the industry, but our biggest problem, the money that used to be bet at Buffalo Raceway has been spread out to the casinos, the lotteries. We'll have a better product, but it's still up to us to get our customers back.”

So much has changed, and yet so little is different. VLT's are not a silver bullet, nor are they being viewed that way. Like any good business, paying attention to the most basic of basics – customer service, quality of product, value for the dollar – will ultimately determine the fate of Buffalo, Batavia, and tracks all across the state.

Whether the state has arrived in time might still be a photo finish. But, with only a couple legal hurdles left to clear – one major one was cleared just last week – it's not inconceivable the two local businesses could ring in the new year with shiny, clanging, flashing presents for the thousands who have spent years toiling in decline, disappointment and despair.

Maybe destiny can be put on hold. Full speed ahead, captain.

(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a paid weekly circulation of 75,000 homes, providing collaborative advertising and editorial support for member publications. For more information on WIN, or to provide feedback on this column, visit our website at www.wnynewspapers.com. Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)