

NYRA Chief Expects Big Season at Saratoga



NYRA president and CEO Chris Kay speaks at a Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce breakfast held Thursday morning at the National Museum of Horse Racing in Saratoga Springs. LAUREN HALLIGAN -- lhalligan@digitalfirstmedia.com

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Courtesy The Saratogian*

SARATOGA SPRINGS>> One of the biggest economic boosts to the Spa City and the Capital Region, the Saratoga Race Course, opens Friday, and the 40-day racing meet is expected to bring in lots of money once again this year.

The horses will be trotting and the money will be flowing for the next six weeks in the greater Saratoga region.

On the eve of the track's 147th racing season, New York Racing Association president and CEO Chris Kay reminded the local business community that the "New York Racing Association is the cornerstone of an industry that generates 2.1 billion dollars in annual economic impact," he said

at a Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce breakfast Thursday morning at the National Museum of Horse Racing, just down the street from the track.

Kay has been with NYRA for just two years, and in that time the company has made considerable progress. Last year NYRA made an operating profit for the first time in 13 years, operating at a deficit for many years, before during and after bankruptcy. The profit made last year by reducing expenses and seeking new streams of revenue was 1.5 million, a number Kay hopes to increase with more new changes this season.

“It is critically important that this business, the New York Racing Association, operate in a sustainable manner because of the impact that we have on the many thousands who call Saratoga and the greater Capital Region their home,” Kay said.

But the Saratoga Race Course is for many others as well. About 60 percent of track attendees are tourists from outside of the Capital Region, Kay said.

While people certainly love the track, keeping those tourists coming is not always an easy task.

“Our collective challenge as steward of the Saratoga Race Course is to preserve and enhance its appeal to our guests as we strive to sustain its viability for decades to come,” Kay said.

In recent years NYRA has invested \$23 million in capital to enhance the guest experience, improve the backstretch area, and install better safety measures. Results of those investments that track-goers will notice are 1,000 new high definition televisions, three high definition video boards and large video walls. NYRA also revamped the track’s sound system, strengthened the wi-fi and added 350 additional free picnic tables.

Other new attractions are the Tom Durkin Replay Center will feature audio clips from the former announcer, who retired last season, the “Walk of Fame,” an open air pavilion honoring racing industry greats, a renovated sports bar and a space where children will have the opportunity to pet the horses.

One new change that’s received mixed reviews is the picnic table reservation program. Tested on Travers Day last year, the system allows those who wish to pay to reserve a table at the track a chance to plan ahead and secure their spot. For this season 1,100 reservations have already been made and almost every Saturday is booked. “It’s become very, very successful,” Kay said Thursday. For others who don’t want to pay extra, there are still 850 free picnic tables available on a first come first serve basis.

Kay assured business leaders at the breakfast Thursday that these changes are for the greater good. “We are running a business that is a major league sport for this region, one that is critically important to the economic prosperity of Saratoga and the surrounding area,” he said. “We understand that and we take that responsibility seriously, because we know the people throughout this region depend upon our health and success for their health and success.”

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