

## NASCAR, The Largest Proposed NYC Sports Stadium Of All

by {ga=blander}

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Despite all the press about proposed new sports stadiums, many New Yorkers know surprisingly little about the largest one. Which one would have the biggest field, the most spectator seats, feature the biggest new retail mall, and sit on the largest redevelopment site?

Not the West Side Stadium, even if it hadn't gone down to defeat through a mix of community organizing, Cablevision cash, and political pique. Not the Nets Arena at Forest City Ratner's proposed Brooklyn Atlantic Yards (which received something of [coronation recently from The New York Times](#)), as if to reassure the public that this is still a developer's town), even though the project's 21 acres could wind up having as many as 6,000 units of housing and 200,000 square feet of retail space. Not the new Yankee Stadium, with its new lucrative luxury sky boxes, to be built on the site of Macombs Dam Park in the South Bronx.

The largest sports facility proposed for NYC right now is a NASCAR track on Staten Island. The track would seat 80,000 fans, watching cars race around a track three-quarters of a mile long, near a new 620,000 square foot big-box retail mall on a 675-acre site. The site, the former BATX oil tank farm located off the West Shore Expressway, south of the Goethals Bridge in Bloomfield, S.I., is the largest vacant industrial property in New York City (and the site of a gas tank explosion in 1973 that killed 40 workers).

### Who Among Us Does Not Love NASCAR?

Blue-state, subway-riding New Yorkers -- who don't feel the pressure that John Kerry did to be loved by American stock-car racing fans -- might be forgiven for knowing little about the fastest growing sport in the United States. NASCAR -- the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing -- was founded in 1948 by Bill France, Sr. Several years later, he founded the International Speedway Corporation, which owns the racetracks. Stock car racing remained a largely Southern sport, with a limited audience, until the 1970s, when the R.J. Reynolds tobacco company became a lead sponsor, and the Daytona 500 became the first nationally televised stock car race. Still a family-owned business, NASCAR has annual revenues in the billions and is regularly cited as the fastest growing spectator sport in the United States.

The International Speedway Corporation, also owned by the France family, owns 12 of the NASCAR racetracks around the country (they recently opened tracks near Kansas City and Chicago). The ISC has been actively looking to expand into the northeast for a while. After deciding that an available site in the Meadowlands was too small, they set their sites on Staten Island. In December, the ISC and the Related Corporation (one of NYC's largest real estate

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developers, whose recent projects include the AOL Time Warner Center and the Gateway Center mall in East New York) teamed up to buy the property for \$110 million.

### Traffic, Environmental, and Fiscal Lessons from the Gas Guzzlers

Since purchasing the site, the International Speedway Corporation has been hard at work to pre-empt local concerns about environmental issues and especially traffic. They have put forward an innovative traffic plan for the three races that would take place each year. There will be only 8,400 parking spaces for the 80,000 fans, and Staten Islanders will have priority for these. Everyone else will have to come by ferry (NASCAR says they'll rent just about every available ferry in the region on race weekends), bus (from parking lots in New Jersey and elsewhere), and perhaps even a new light rail line. And fans shouldn't count on driving anyway and parking on local streets. Every ticket will be tied to a means of transportation, and you won't be allowed into the race any other way. NASCAR also promises to pay to widen the Goethals Bridge toll plaza and add new ramps to their site from the West Side Expressway.

In addition, the International Speedway Corporation says they will preserve 245 acres of the site as wetlands (the site features heron and ibises). The new ferry docks on the site could be used by commuters during the work week. Local schools and not-for-profits will be able to use the track on the 300+ days per year when there is not race activity, and they are allowed to solicit in the stands on race weekends.

When lined up against NYC's other mega-projects, Aaron Naparstek has written, "the Nascar track is in many ways [the most innovative, thoughtful and urban-friendly](#)." So, what does it say about the state of New York City urban planning and development that the toothless, beer-bellied rubes of Nascar are doing a better job of caring for our city than we are?"

One other feature distinguishes the NASCAR proposal from the Jets and the Nets: The International Speedway Corporation is seeking no public subsidies for their \$550 million track, and it is likely they would even pay some real estate taxes "although it is still possible that the Related Companies will seek subsidies or city money for infrastructure for the mall.

### Local Opposition Growing

Despite these innovative features, local sentiment has not been favorable. Last week, 40 Staten Island activists, including ministers and the leaders of civic organizations, gathered to form [a united group to oppose NASCAR](#)

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. They are hoping to form a broader umbrella group of civic organizations opposed to the project.

As a result of growing civic pressure, several elected officials have become more critical of the project. Republican South Shore Councilmember Andrew Lanza was quoted in the New York Times in May, 2004 as saying, "It's an intriguing idea that we would like to explore further. At first you are concerned about the additional traffic and noise, but then you take a closer look at it, and you are only talking about a couple of events a year and you have a great facility that can be put to other uses." By this March, however, Lanza said he was gearing up to intensify his opposition to the track. Democratic North Shore Councilmember Michael McMahon mused in December that with community benefits like a new high school and an indoor track & field complex, the project might be made to work for the community. But more recently he has been critical of NASCAR's traffic assessment. And Republican Mid Island Councilmember James Oddo, who represents the area, has consistently expressed skepticism. Their opinions will matter -- since (also unlike the Jets and Nets) the project is not sponsored by the Empire State Development Corporation and will therefore have to go through the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) which includes a vote by the City Council.

Residents and elected officials are concerned that while the track will start with 8,400 parking spaces, the ISC will find it unworkable and try to expand to more. NASCAR fans often come for the entire weekend (a good many in Winnebagos -- current plans call for 635 RV parking spaces on site), so how will they get around while they are here? Others are concerned that even if race weekend traffic is managed, the proposed retail mall would cause more consistent problems on the West Shore and Staten Island Expressways, and on the Goethals Bridge.

In addition, because there are only three races per year, the track could be of limited benefit to the local economy. There will be construction jobs, and it will surely be good for Lois and Richard Nicotra, who have recently built a surprisingly successful hotel complex nearby. However, because the traffic plan will prevent people from driving, it is unlikely there will be much spillover to many area businesses. The big box retail stores are likely to be national chains, which won't help local businesses, and which generally create lower-wage jobs.

But NASCAR suggests that other uses for the site could be even less desirable. The site is contaminated, and will require more than four million cubic feet of silt to raise the ground to a level that won't be underwater in heavy rains. As a result, it is unclear if it would be appropriate for residential use. Staten Island residents have recently [protested against what they see as overdevelopment](#), so many might frown on new housing there anyway. Some have called for a movie studio, but with the new

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Steiner Studios in Brooklyn already competing with Silvercup and Kaufman in Queens while the film industry is increasingly leaving the U.S. altogether, it is hard to see how a studio here would compete.

Whether Staten Island and New York City will be willing to go for the "noise and speed and glory and death" that is NASCAR (32 drivers have died in crashes) "as described in Jeff MacGregor's new book, [Sunday Money: Speed! Lust! Madness! Death! A Hot Lap Around America with Nascar](#)" remains to be seen. One thing is certain, though. If the track is built, New York politicians running for national office will have less distance to travel to show their solidarity with American race car fans "so long as they don't forget their ferry ticket.

Brad Lander is the director of the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development