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by corey johnsen

LET KENTUCKY COMPETE

This is the most important week to the Kentucky Thoroughbred industry since 1902, when Colonel Matt Winn and a group of investors purchased Churchill Downs, which was in financial ruin and ready to shut down. As we all know, the rest is history for Churchill Downs, the Kentucky Derby and the sport of horse racing.

Like 107 years ago, the Kentucky Thoroughbred industry is at a crossroads.

Governor Steve Beshear has called a special session, which will begin this week. Governor Beshear and Speaker of the House Greg Stumbo have worked with members of the horse industry and legislators to craft a bill that is a win-win for the Commonwealth of Kentucky and its horse industry. The legislation will authorize racetracks to offer VLTs, which will generate over \$300 million in voluntary tax revenue for the state. This money is already being spent by Kentuckians at the casinos just across the state's northern borders. A significant portion of the revenue dedicated will be allocated to the horse industry, a \$4-billion industry responsible for 100,000 jobs. It is Kentucky's largest agricultural crop and the state's signature industry.

The Kentucky Equine Education Project (KEEP) has been effective in uniting the horse industry and lobbying for the most comprehensive expanded gaming bill of this type. All racing breeds--Thoroughbred, Standardbred and Quarter Horse--will benefit from substantially increased purses and breeders' awards. An equine breed authority will be created to promote non-racing breeds and economic development within the equine industry. Also, the Kentucky Horse Racing Commission will see a multi-million-dollar increase in funding, and there will be money dedicated for backstretch improvements and many other programs.

As the president and part owner of Kentucky Downs, and vice president and partner of Richland Hills, a stallion station and breeding farm in Midway, Kentucky, I am reminded on a regular basis that our industry is at risk. Every day, horses and jobs are leaving Kentucky to go to states that have funded increased purses and breeders' awards with expanded gaming. It is time for action by our legislators to level the playing field.

I have a unique perspective on this situation, because I was intimately involved with the effort which passed a bill in 2004 authorizing the tracks in Oklahoma to offer slot machines. This allowed the horse industry, which was on the mat and being counted out, to compete with the 94 Native American casinos in the state.

And it worked. Purses have almost tripled. Quality racehorses, mares and stallions of all racing breeds have moved into the state. Remington Park, which was losing millions of dollars in 2004, is now back on solid financial footing and has invested millions in its facility and stable area. The recently concluded Quarter Horse meeting was the best in track history.

Some of you might wonder why this legislation in Kentucky is important to you. Right now, Thoroughbred racing in America is going through a credibility crisis. Some people contend that our product is not relevant anymore. I disagree. I believe that we have a great sport and are in the process of reinventing our business plan. When the economy turns around, we will be successful. I also believe that we need a strong foundation in Kentucky that we can point to, not a situation where tracks are closing down and horses are leaving by the thousands. Plus, this bill will add over \$100 million annually to the revenue stream for America's horse industry.

All the hard work in Kentucky has the ball, or legislation, on the five-yard line, but, as we all know, those last few yards are the toughest to gain. We have to stay united and work together, and they can't beat us. We can push this over the goal line.

So, what can you do? Go to www.horseswork.com, the excellent KEEP website. It is full of information, from presenting the facts to providing contact numbers for elected officials. There is an easy way to find your representative or senator. Call them at the state capitol at (502) 564-8100, or e-mail them and voice your support of VLTs at the tracks. Be sure to mention if you are a constituent, or if you board your horses in their district. Believe me, our opposition is doing this and generating a large volume of calls through their church e-mail calls to action. *Comments for publication? Please email TDN management at suefinley@thoroughbreddailynews.com*