



## **PRESS REGISTER EDITORIAL: PERMIT A MILESTONE FOR MOTORSPORTS PARK**

From Mobile Press-Register

The willingness of backers of the Alabama Motorsports Park to work with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has resulted in a plan that allows construction with a minimal environmental impact.

Although the permit process delayed the project, the outcome is an example of how government and private enterprise can work together to allow a major economic development to go forward with as little effect as possible on the environment.

The recently issued environmental permit is a crucial step forward for the project because Gulf Coast Entertainment LLC needed it to obtain financing, according to Mike Dow, managing member of the partnership and a former mayor of Mobile.

The park, affiliated with Dale Earnhardt Jr., is still strongly on track despite the recent collapse of financial markets, Mr. Dow says. He admits that the financial marketplace is "challenging" and "tough," but says GCE partners believe they can get financing within the next several months.

Construction is expected to take 18 to 24 months. The park's opening is now set for 2011.

GCE expects to invest \$640 million at the site off Interstate 65, largely within the city limits of Prichard. The plans include three different types of racetracks, seating, parking and an RV lot. Mr. Dow says the GCE expects at least another \$640 million will be spent by major entertainment and hospitality investors around the park.

The acreage that would be affected was cut roughly in half (to 84 acres) when the scope of the project was reduced in response to the Corps of Engineers' objections last year. The area includes wetlands and gopher tortoises, a threatened species.

The environmental group Mobile Baykeeper remains concerned, but a corps spokesman said the agency found "no significant impacts" to the environment with the current plan. Mr. Dow says his group made every change the corps suggested. Public hearings also gave people a chance to express their concerns to the developers.

The Alabama Motorsports Park is expected to produce about 5,000 new jobs in an area of Mobile County that sorely needs them. Prichard Mayor Ron Davis is right in saying that it will be the biggest single positive impact on his city in his lifetime.

But all of Mobile County and the surrounding region will benefit as well from a significant new tourist attraction regularly bringing in thousands of fans.

If additional entertainment venues, hotels, restaurants and retail facilities come, too, the economic impact will be even greater. Indeed, Prichard could be transformed from a business-poor city with an under funded government and infrastructure to one of the fastest-growing parts of Mobile County.

Just as the Alabama Motorsports Park did what was necessary to fit in with the environment, any affiliated developers surrounding the park should be able to do likewise.