

TRYING TO BEAT THE ODDS

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Sans slots, track chief works to boost biz

By SCOTT VAN VOORHIS

Richard Fields is fast out of the gate in his long-shot bid to revive Suffolk Downs, but the finish line remains elusive.

The veteran casino developer and horse-racing enthusiast will unveil plans for Suffolk's upcoming racing season at a downtown luncheon today.

However, a year after he took the reins at the beleaguered East Boston track, Fields' bid to restore Suffolk to its glory days still faces long odds.

A marketing campaign aimed at resurrecting interest in live racing has yielded results, but overall track revenue declined last year.

And a bid to make Suffolk the site of a gambling resort has folded, for now anyway, with the demise of Gov. Deval Patrick's casino plan.

Whether the track can survive long-term without slot machines remains an open question, said the Rev. Richard McGowan, a Boston College economics professor and gaming industry expert.

"The savior of that is some kind of additional gambling, or they are never going to make it," McGowan said.

Fields is expected to detail efforts to boost the profile of Suffolk's marquee race, the MassCap, at today's speech at the Boston Harbor Hotel.

But the New York business magnate, who made a fortune building a casino for Florida's Seminole tribe, is also expected to address Suffolk's struggle to stay competitive. Massa-



STAFF FILE PHOTO BY JOHN WILCOX

UPS AND DOWNS: Since Richard Fields took over Suffolk Downs last year, attendance is up, but wagering revenues are down. Fields will address the state of the racetrack and unveil plans for the MassCap race at a luncheon today.

achusetts tracks are some of the last in the Northeast without slot machines, competing against slot-armed tracks in Delaware, New York, Maine, Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

"The new ownership at Suffolk Downs is committed to investing in horse racing in Massachusetts, but like other industries,

we face difficult challenges and need the tools to compete," said Chip Tuttle, a spokesman for the track.

So far, Fields has had the most success with live racing, boosting racetrack attendance 20 percent last year. The amount of money bet on races at the track also shot up 11 percent to \$12.2 million, reversing a

years-long decline.

Along with marketing the track more aggressively, Fields has spent as much as \$2 million on renovations that include building a gift shop and a family-style picnic area.

But overall wagering revenue fell to \$116 million last year, a 5 percent decline over 2006. Behind

the falloff was a big drop in simulcasting revenue, or money bet by patrons on races around the country broadcast on TV monitors at the track.

"They are just hanging on," said state Sen. Michael Morrissey (D-Quincy), an expert on the racing industry.

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