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TURNING TRACK INTO HOUSING WOULD BE A DRAG, RACERS SAY Columbus Dispatch (Ohio) June 19, 2005 Sunday, Home Final Edition

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SECTION: NEWS; Pg. 04B**LENGTH:** 481 words**HEADLINE:** TURNING TRACK INTO HOUSING WOULD BE A DRAG, RACERS SAY**BYLINE:** Randy Ludlow, THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH**DATELINE:** MOUNT VERNON, OHIO**BODY:**

Pulling trailers containing precisely tuned and lovingly polished hot rods, the RVs began to fill **Pacemakers** Dragway Park on Friday afternoon.

It's what they wait all week for: a weekend of racing on the eighth-mile drag strip in Knox County.

But after a half-century, the whine of high-end horsepower and the acrid aroma of burning tires might vanish.

Houses and condominiums could repopulate the 142-acre property under a zoning change approved recently by the Clinton Township trustees.

The rezoning could be derailed -- and the track perhaps preserved -- by a ballot referendum to reverse the trustees' decision. Some neighbors are upset with the five-houses-per-acre density of the proposal.

Developer Robert Dolin has an option to buy the property from LNC Inc., contingent on the rezoning and other matters. The proposed project calls for up to 600 housing units.

Everything will be on hold until the fate of the referendum is determined, said Robert Weston, a Mount Vernon lawyer representing the seller and would-be buyer.

Brian Schopp, a 34-year-old carpenter and weekend racer from Centerburg who leases and operates **Pacemakers** Dragway, said he believes the track can be saved.

Whether by referendum or the developer's failure to lure builders, he remains optimistic he can persuade Larry Nelson of Galena, the principal of LNC Inc., to eventually sell him the track, about 40 miles northwest of Columbus.

"It would be tough to lose it," Schopp said. "This is such a family atmosphere. We're putting a lot of cars in the place and people in the seats."

Scott Pullins, a Mount Vernon lawyer representing neighboring property owners, plans to guide a campaign to collect 60 petition signatures and send the rezoning decision to the Nov. 8 ballot.

"You're talking about cramming as many houses and condos on an acre as you can," he said. "And the drag strip has been a pretty good neighbor."

If **Pacemakers** folded, racers could run at the bigger-league National Trail Raceway near Kirkersville in Licking County, but it would cost more and not be as convenient. The next closest sanctioned track is near La Rue in Marion County.

Pacemakers' closing would end a tradition for three generations of Vernons, who have matched their machinery and reflexes against other speed enthusiasts for five decades.

"That track means almost everything to us. It literally is our life," said Jamie Vernon, a 47-year-old Mount Vernon mechanic.

Vernon's father, James, a founder of the drag strip in 1956, was a racer. Jamie is a racer. And so is his wife, Pam.

Now they run a cherry-red 1966 Dodge Coronet with a 440 cubic-inch V-8 for their 18-year-old daughter, Jennifer. The car covers the eighth-mile at 90 mph in fewer than 8 seconds.

"We have a little motto: 'Racing's not a hobby, it's a way of life,' " Vernon said. "That's what we do."

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GRAPHIC: Photo, MAP, (1) FRED SQUILLANTE DISPATCH/, A car kicks up clouds of smoke from beneath its spinning tires before edging, up to the starting line at **Pacemakers** Dragway Park. Weekend racing would end, if the Mount Vernon track is sold./, (2) Map

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