

Friday, December 01, 2006— Time:7:29:57 AMEST

## Racing has \$173M impact

By CHRIS BROWN / Journal Staff Writer

CHARLES TOWN — Jefferson County horsemen were excited to reveal the results of a new study Thursday, which suggests that the horse racing industry has both a positive economic effect in the Eastern Panhandle and is vital to preserving green space.

The study found that the Eastern Panhandle has grown so much in six years that it now helps employ more than 3,600 people and has an annual economic impact of \$173 million.

Randy Funkhouser, the president of the Horsemen's Benevolent & Protective Association of Charles Town, said during a luncheon held at Avanti Restaurant in Charles Town on Thursday that Jefferson County residents want a little bit of everything in terms of wanting growth but also wanting to preserve their past and called horse racing a good way to bridge the gap between the two.

"(Horse racing) is a wonderful thing for Jefferson County. It works well with growth and supports farms," Funkhouser said.

The study was commissioned by the HBPA and completed by Lexington, Ky.-based Thalheimer Research Associates, which studied the economic impact of the horse racing industry on the area since 2000.

The number of horse farms in Jefferson County increased from about 55 in 2000 to 140 today, said Richard Thalheimer, who presented the results of the study to members of the HBPA and community leaders at the luncheon.

Thalheimer said the success of horse farms creates an economic incentive to preserve green space in Jefferson County.

"It's a private sector way to keep farms from being developed for other uses," said Thalheimer, whose study focused on three sectors: Horse racing at Charles Town Races & Slots, horse owners and trainers and horse breeders in the Jefferson County area.

Thalheimer acknowledged that the recent approval of video slot machines in Pennsylvania could threaten the video slot industry in West Virginia, which helps fund area horsemen. West Virginia law requires that a certain percentage of a casino's revenues be put into a purse fund to protect the horse racing industry.

West Virginia lawmakers are considering allowing table games to remain competitive and continue to support area horsemen, but the idea does not have

universal approval.

Delegate John Doyle, D-Jefferson, who was also present at the luncheon, said the greatest threat to the racing and gaming industry would be if Maryland adopted slots, and that Pennsylvania slots will not affect the Charles Town market. Doyle said Charles Town draws most of its earnings from the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area.

Doyle said he would be hesitant to support legislation in favor of table gaming unless certain provisions were made, including forbidding the state government from raiding the horsemen's purse fund to cover workers compensation and getting significant funding from video lottery revenue for the Jefferson County Farmland Protection Fund.

"I'm still uncertain about Penn National's commitment to horse racing," Doyle said.

However, Funkhouser said he was eager to continue to work in partnership with Penn National Gaming Inc., the owner of Charles Town Races & Slots, on legislation that would allow table games at West Virginia casinos.

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Section: News Posted: 12/1/2006