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Wednesday, December 14, 2005

### A Starting Point

Winston-Salem Journal

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Wilkes County leaders have a starting point from which to begin planning for the future of the North Wilkesboro Speedway. Now comes the hard part: County leaders need to figure out a way to make good use of this important property that has sat closed for several years now.

The starting point comes from track co-owner Bruton Smith. He has named his price to sell the track to Wilkes County: \$12 million, Monte Mitchell reported in Monday's Journal. Even if co-owner Bob Bahre agrees with Smith on that price, it's way too high. County tax assessors reduced the track's value to \$4.83 million in 2003, citing the general deterioration of the property.

Smith and Bahre bought the speedway for \$14 million in 1995, but their real financial benefit was the two NASCAR dates that came with the track. When it closed in 1996, they kept those lucrative dates and moved them to other tracks.

The closing was a heavy hit for Wilkes, which had long prided itself on the track and the money it brought in. Understandably, there's plenty of nostalgia for the

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track's glory days, both inside and outside the county.

The group Save the Speedway, led by a computer specialist in his 20s from New York, gathered almost 4,600 signatures of support on its Web site for starting racing again at the North Wilkesboro Speedway. The group has met with county commissioners. The passion of this group is strong. Some say they have well-organized plans for the track. Its NASCAR glory days are long gone, but the track could still have lower-level racing.

At least the track would be open and have a chance to bring money into the county - albeit a lot less than in its heyday.

But Save the Speedway lacks money and wants the county to buy the track and lease it to the group. The county can't afford to do that, especially given the \$12 million price tag, and the fact that the track needs repaving and other work. But if the owners did the right thing and significantly lowered their price, perhaps the county and Save the Speedway could figure out a way to make this deal work. Or maybe another entrepreneur, or group of entrepreneurs, has other ideas on how to bring racing back to the North Wilkesboro Speedway. Or to use it for racing and other entertainment attractions, such as concerts.

There are no easy answers. But serous brainstorming is needed. Because as it is now, this track, which could be bringing Wilkes County tourism dollars, sits vacant, not doing anybody any good.

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