

# Construction of St. Croix Meadows dog track started 25 years ago

By [Doug Stohlberg](#) on Aug 7, 2014 at 10:26 a.m.

**C**onstruction of the St. Croix Meadows Dog Track began 25 years ago this week. The facility has been surrounded by controversy -- starting before construction began, the dog races themselves and the proposal to make it into a casino. Controversy continues today with recent efforts to turn small parts of the vacant building into a school.

For about two years before the track opened, the community was heavily embroiled in the midst of the dog track controversy.

As the track proposal unfolded, local businessman Burt Nordstrand was hired by the late Fred Havenick, head honcho of Flagler dog tracks in Miami and Bonita Springs, Fla. It would be Nordstrand's job to be the local front man for the dog track effort. He stayed with the company until 1993, when he went back to devoting all his time to his gas station/ convenience store business – Hudson-based SSG.

Wisconsin opened the door to pari-mutuel betting after voters approved it in April 1987. Shortly after the law changed, there were several track proposals for the Hudson area, including a horse track in Roberts.



Construction of the dog track began 25 years ago. The front page of the Star-Observer on Aug. 3, 1989, tells the story. The lack of “fanfare” refers to the fact that there was never an official groundbreaking ceremony.

Attempts to schedule an event were made, hoping to also give opponents an opportunity to demonstrate their opposition. Opponents were unwilling to be involved and construction began without any publicity.

Another Hudson dog track was proposed by a man named John Sausen. He wanted to build a dog track in the area of the truck stop off Exit 4 on Interstate 94 in the town of Hudson. The plan garnered some support in the town and was plodding forward in 1988. Like all proposals, of course, there was plenty of opposition. In January 1989, a full slate of candidates ran for supervisor posts in the town, including three dog track opponents.

Nordstrand announced plans for a \$25 million dog track in August 1988. The battle was on to see which contender, if any, would get a license. The opposition to both plans was fierce.

The St. Croix Meadows plan was well organized and well-funded -- Sausen eventually scrapped his plan. Before the Hudson track was built, however, the final price came in closer to \$40 million.

What Burt Nordstrand may not have anticipated was the battle that developed over the effort to gain approval for the track. Nearly every City Council meeting lasted for several hours, every meeting had Twin Cities' television cameras in the room, nearly every meeting was done before a packed house, and there were lawsuits and threats of lawsuits in every corner.

The major opposition to the track came from a group known as Citizens for Continued Responsible Development (CCRD). Some of the opposition names mentioned in a Star-Observer story during that time included Bruce Moffat, Bill Cranmer, David Dueholm, Mark Erickson, Michael and Pamela Willman and James and Helen Comfort.

Part of the dog track excitement included a mayoral recall and several heated local elections.

Oddly enough, it seemed like the track battle lasted for years, but by June 1989, the state issued a license for St. Croix Meadows Greyhound Racing Park, and construction began in August.

The Hudson track was the last of the five to open in Wisconsin -- the others opened in 1990; St. Croix Meadows opened with great fanfare in June 1991. Considered the fanciest of the five tracks in Wisconsin, St. Croix Meadows was a showpiece with fancy restaurants, clubhouse, spotless facilities and more. Presently, all five tracks are closed.

Among the guests at the opening on June 20, 1991, was Gov. Tommy Thompson. The five opening performances that weekend drew 20,565 people. The track's high water mark probably came on the July 4 weekend when the crowd numbered 33,038 for the weekend, and a July 4 matinee performance attracted 9,233 people.

Attendance, however, was already starting to dwindle as the summer of 1991 wore on. Later that fall, the idea of year-round races was scrapped and racing was suspended for the winter months – the handwriting was beginning to appear on the wall.

The problem? Indian casinos. At about the same time St. Croix Meadows opened its doors, Indian casinos in the Twin Cities and northwestern Wisconsin were opening their doors.

People would apparently rather gamble on their own schedule instead of the schedule of a dog track. St. Croix Meadows officials were still fairly pleased with their first year of operation, but lost money.

Unfortunately for Fred Havenick, that first year was the high-water mark. Attendance fell dramatically in year two and continued to spiral downward until the track finally closed in 2001. The track never showed a profit. It probably would have closed much sooner if there was not the hope of adding a casino to the facility.

In 1992 it became apparent that the future of the dog track was in jeopardy. Havenick came up with another plan – he partnered with three Wisconsin

Native American tribes (Lac Courte Oreilles, Red Cliff and Sokaogon/Mole Lake) in an effort to get approval for a casino at the dog track.

That effort lasted until late 2001 when the casino proposal finally hit a brick wall. The 10-month fight in 1988 and 1989 to stop the original dog track seemed like a walk in the park compared to the nine-plus year battle between casino proponents and opponents!

A little known fact – Hudson voters actually approved a casino in a non-binding referendum in December 1992. The pro-casino referendum passed 1,351-1,288. Even that, however, sparked a controversy. The town of Troy held a similar vote and the anti-casino group won that battle – if a person combined the two votes -- as casino opponents favored -- the anti-casino vote came out on top by a slight margin.

The casino effort was a long, complicated process, including environmental assessments and an application to the U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs. The BIA first denied the Hudson application, but it was then discovered that the BIA had been pressured by Indian tribes who could have been financially impacted by competition from a casino in Hudson. After threats of lawsuits, the BIA later reversed its decision.

But when all seemed ready to go, then-Republican Wisconsin Gov. Scott McCallum vetoed the casino. That was followed by a series of lawsuits. Among them was a suit that a state's governor should not have veto power over an agency of the federal government. The argument was that if an applicant did all the paperwork and the BIA was satisfied, a governor should not hold that much power.

All legal channels were seemingly exhausted by the end of 2001. That same year the dog track closed and has sat empty ever since.

Havenick was diagnosed with lymphoma in November 2005 and died June 21,

2006, in Miami. The property is still owned by the Havenick heirs who, had expressed an interest in selling the property in early 2011. It was the first time track owners had expressed any interest in disposing of the property. Rumors of a potential school site began circulating immediately and the school district later announced that it was indeed interested, as were the track owners.

In April 2012, district voters passed a referendum (4,789 to 3,768) to allow the district to purchase the dog track for a secondary school site. The dog track turmoil appeared to have finally ended!

But...The Hudson City Council denied the district the necessary rezoning of the property in September 2012. The city's logic was that the 126 acre site would be an attractive source of tax income in the future and did not want to give up the land for a new tax-exempt school.

The "(school) district came back with a second proposal that included a larger mix of school and commercial land, but that also died. The city did not technically vote a second time on the rezoning the property. The school made its new proposal last spring that included less school land and more commercial land. With the new plan, the district had the property's wetland evaluated and the buildable property for the school came up short of the 65 acres the district has set as a minimum for a new school site. After considering the proposal, the city then voted 4-2 to not schedule another meeting with the district. Shortly thereafter, the school district voted to withdraw its proposal to consider the dog track as a school site.

The school district is now in the process of seeking another location for a potential school.

The Havenick heirs continue to pay taxes on the property, although the current value is much lower than the potential future value. Meanwhile, the facility continues to deteriorate and some say the building will probably have to be torn down eventually. Other than the school, there doesn't appear to be

anybody busting down the doors to purchase the nearly 25-year-old building. The structure, of course, was designed as a dog track and would be hard to convert to something useful; the building has now been empty for 13-plus years.

We don't have any ideas about what will ultimately happen to the dog track. Based on the city's logic, it will likely be turned into commercial/industrial land at some point in time but nobody is seeing any negotiations between potential buyers and the Havenick heirs.

The track site has seen nothing but controversy for the past 25 years – we'll have to wait and see the future reaction to the next proposal – if, and when, that happens.



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