

PPIR owners envision 'garage mahals,' gearhead heaven

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THE GAZETTE

Amy Atwater tore off her racing helmet, the adrenaline still pumping. She had just finished a spin around the [Pikes Peak International Raceway](#)'s oval in a stock car, courtesy of the track's new partner, the [Richard Petty Driving Experience](#).

Her drive signifies the operation's shift into a new gear, as the track is being transformed from a spectator venue to a motorsports mall where regular folks get to participate.

"It's a pretty fundamental change to go from spectators to participation," said PPIR spokesman Vince Salas. "It's one thing to come and sit in the grandstands; it's a whole other thing to sit behind the wheel."

Or, as Atwater said to friends in the flush of excitement: "It's scary as hell but it's fun. We can definitely sell that, over and over."

Atwater works for Destinations Services Corp., a company that helps places like The Broadmoor book activities for guests. That's the type of partner track owners are recruiting as they seek to become an "exhilaration destination." They see the PPIR as a natural extension of the region's tourism draw and reputation for adventure sports.

Just off I-25, on the stretch between Colorado Springs and Pueblo, the PPIR has been host to crickets chirping rather than motors revving in recent years.

The spot held a horse track for decades, until developers broke ground in 1996 on a \$35 million racing facility. But owners struggled to consistently attract the big-name events that bring in the serious dough. International Speedway Corporation bought the track in 2005, then shuttered it, and it sat dormant for three years.

Private investors — led by finance banker and CEO John H. Molloy, real estate developer Guy Kathe and car dealer Bob Brockway — pounced in 2008. They bought the neglected track for \$9 million, Molloy said, and spent \$3 million revitalizing the raceway and infrastructure.

Besides capital, the owners brought a new vision.

"At the end of the day, the business of fun is still a business," said Molloy, who specializes in sports finance. "We want to be here for a long time. The development plans are past my lifetime." Forget about living and dying on a few NASCAR or IndyCar races. Instead, create a place where gearheads can hang out year-round. Think of it as a country club for car lovers, or a shopping mall full of motorsports goodies. They tore out most of the bleachers — leaving seating for 10,000 — and began to court the retail outlets for their mall. Effectively, the PPIR is now a rental facility.

People who want to drive can come and catch a ride in the Legends cars run by Griffith Speed & Customs, or in the stock cars run by the Richard Petty Driving Experience. Go 4 It Racing Schools is offering classes at the track. And the Speedway Driver Search reality-TV show is filming at PPIR.

Professional drivers are using the track to test their machines, Molloy said, and area car clubs are renting the PPIR to stretch out their classic cars and hot rods. He said the track had logged 215 event days this year through Oct. 31.

“There’s nothing that competes with PPIR right now,” said Tony Di Censo of the Southern Colorado Mopar club. He just booked the Rocky Mountain Muscle Car Classic at the track next June.

He said the attraction is a race track that club members can drive on, plans for a drag strip, and options like the Richard Petty Driving Experience that give people more to do and see at a car show.

Drivers have flexibility because the 1,300-acre PPIR has several race courses, including the one-mile oval, a 1.3-mile oval road course, a second road course that should be finished in 2010, and a 12-acre slab of asphalt tailor-made for drifters.

That acreage brings up the second half of the new owners’ equation: real estate development.

Molloy imagines a gas station (that also sells racing fuel) along the interstate, a hotel and restaurants. He wants to develop “Garage Mahals” where car enthusiasts can store their beloved vehicles next to a track and have “man cave” hangouts for their tinkering.

“Both sides have to work,” Molloy said of the motorsports mall and the real estate development. “And if they do, they will feed off each other and make it much more viable.” The PPIR has begun discussions with the city of Fountain, hoping to have the entire site annexed into the city. A portion of the land is in unincorporated El Paso County. Molloy said they can offer the city sales tax revenue and jobs, while the city could offer support ranging from water to police and fire protection.

Lisa Cochrun, economic development director for Fountain, said she is excited about the possibilities. She believes the track is an unusual community feature that’s been sitting idle for too long.

“I think it has huge potential to help from Pueblo to Colorado Springs,” Cochrun said.