

Group of UK students join effort to halt instant racing at The Red Mile

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Matt Shafer is a fifth-year senior at the University of Kentucky, and he loves the school and the surrounding city.

So last fall, he was alarmed to learn that The Red Mile, the harness racing track close to campus, planned to add an entertainment center with hundreds of "instant racing" machines, which look like slots and allow people to bet on previously run races.

"I realized how bad it would be for the campus and the neighborhood," Shafer said. "These machines are designed to promote addiction."

He and a group of about eight like-minded UK students have teamed up with the statewide group [Stop Predatory Gambling](#) to try to bring more attention to the issue through blast emails and a series of videos about the Red Mile plan. They would like to start a grass-roots protest among the university community, particularly with UK administrators who have stayed largely silent on the issue.

Dusty Khoshreza, a UK senior from Eastern Kentucky, said he's seen what happens when people with low incomes spend too much money on lottery tickets, and "I don't want to see that kind of degradation here. People shrug it off, but we want to fight."

They might be too late: the \$30 million facility is scheduled to open in September with 1,000 instant racing terminals.

The facility is a partnership with Keeneland, which originally planned to build its own betting parlor. But when Keeneland got the nod to host the Breeders' Cup this fall, space concerns led it to a partnership with The Red Mile. Revenue from the machines will be split 50-50.

Instant racing machines already can be found at Kentucky Downs and Ellis Park race tracks in Western Kentucky, despite a court challenge brought by the conservative Family Foundation

group. Their lawyer argued the instant racing bets were not pari-mutuel, in which people bet against each other, rather than the house, and therefore were illegal.

In February 2014, the Kentucky Supreme Court sent the case back to Franklin Circuit Court. The case is in discovery, with no date set for retrial.

John Mark Hack, board chairman of the Kentucky chapter of Stop Predatory Gambling, said he was glad the UK students had joined the fight.

"It's never too late for a community to become aware of a development that represents a real detrimental influence on a core part of the city," Hack said. "People are not aware this project is going in — it's intentionally flying under the radar."

Shafer said that he ultimately would like UK to take a stance against the project because the university's power could stop it altogether.

He asked to address the UK Board of Trustees at its May meeting but was turned down because The Red Mile project is not on the board's agenda.

"After their refusal to talk to us on the issue, we would like for them to justify why they're showing no concern," Shafer said. "Why would they not be interested in hearing what students think about such a large development that is happening on campus?"

UK will not be taking a stance against the development, school officials said.

"Policymakers make decisions about what businesses can operate in the state, and we respect that process," said spokesman Jay Blanton. "This is a product limited to people 21 and over, and we're confident that will be enforced. We respect students who are speaking out about an issue they're passionate about, but our responsibility is to continue to educate students, who are adults, about such issues as financial literacy, and certainly we will do that."

Kip Cornett, president and CEO of Cornett Integrated Marketing, represents Keeneland and The Red Mile, and also holds the main advertising and marketing contract for UK. He said that, as of now, there will be an age limit of 21 on the instant racing machines. No marketing will be aimed at students; most marketing on these machines, he said, is aimed at 50-year-old women.

"This is the first step in The Red Mile becoming a far more responsible property as it relates to everything, from the look and feel of the place to the offerings, like outdoor shows for students," Cornett said. "We are firmly convinced we'll be excellent neighbors to UK and the neighborhood around there."

Cornett pointed out that students as young as 18 can go to The Red Mile, Keeneland and other tracks around the state, and bet as much as they want.

"There's websites that allow 18-year-olds to gamble on fantasy sports every day," he said. "This is going to be a big plus for the city as opposed to 600 underdeveloped acres near downtown."

But opponents like Shafer and Hack say they will continue the fight.

"The university doesn't seem to have given very much consideration to this, but it would be in their best interest to look at what's going on and how it affects their campus," Hack said. "If they found that it was not in the best interest, they could do what they need to do to stop it."