

OPINION

The elite want their own racetrack in Alberta's badlands. These local farmers are pushing back

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The hamlet of Rosebud, an hour outside of Calgary, on May 9. Several landowners in and around Rosebud have spent years trying to stop the development of a racetrack on neighbouring land.

JUDE BROCKE/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

A motorsports resort that would loom over a scenic river valley on the edge of the Canadian badlands is testing Alberta's longstanding deference to development, pitting the power of farming families against wealthy car enthusiasts.

Proponents say the Badlands Motorsports Resort – to be located about 100 kilometres northeast of Calgary – will be a welcome addition to the Canadian car racing scene. They say it takes full advantage of the prairie and badlands contours, will add jobs and have a negligible effect on the natural environment.

Opponents say the development will permanently spoil relatively untouched lands overlooking and dropping into the delicate Rosebud River Valley.

“You know, rural Alberta – we're tired,” said Richard Clark, whose family has farmed in the area for more than a century. “If we can't stop this, what can we stop?”

Mr. Clark and others in a group calling themselves Save the Rosebud took their fight to the Court of King's Bench this month, with a request for a judicial review of decisions made by Alberta's Environment Minister and the province's Environmental



Richard Clark drives past the racetrack developer's land, right next to a nesting area for a several hundred bank swallow colonies outside the hamlet of Rosebud.
JUDE BROCKE/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

"There's no way they needed to put motorsports in this critical habitat," said Mr. Clark's wife, Wendy Clark.

Alberta does not balk at razing a wetland to build, say, an oil-sands mine or a new residential development. The idea that vital projects often carry environmental consequences is part of the province's ethos.

But occasionally, a project will engender significant pushback. Examples of this include the opposition to mining in the Eastern Slopes – where ranchers have fought alongside conservation groups to preserve Rocky Mountain watersheds – or the push for a no-development zone around Moose Lake, a special area for Fort McKay First Nation members north of Fort McMurray.

The same might be the case for the proposed racetrack, to be located about five kilometres northeast of Rosebud, a picturesque hamlet of about 100 people best known for its dinner theatre. The motorsports resort would bring vehicle traffic and noise to the area, opponents say.

But most keenly, several wetlands on the plateau and in the valley would be filled in or modified to accommodate the track, they say, altering the feeding grounds of hundreds of bank swallows that nest nearby in the spring and summer. (The project owners dispute that valley wetlands are the main or only feeding ground for the bank swallows.)



A bank swallow flies overhead of a regular nesting area, right across the road from the racetrack developer's land.

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These small swallows have seen their Canadian population crater in recent decades, and are listed as threatened under the federal Species at Risk Act. Save the Rosebud members also fear the birds would be killed by racing vehicles, and are vowing to fight on.

Far from being a case of NIMBYism, the landowners say, their opposition is rooted in environmental preservation. They have attached conservation agreements through non-profit charitable trusts to their own vast lands, creating protections for wetlands and native grasses into perpetuity. Collectively, they have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars of their own money in the fight over more than a decade.

However, at this point, the resort is poised to proceed. It's on 200 hectares of private land, and it has municipal and provincial approvals. James Zelazo, the chief financial officer and project manager, said in an interview they could have shovels in the ground as early as this fall.

Mr. Zelazo and other backers hope to eventually build two racetracks: A 4.8-kilometre plateau track where users will be allowed to drive up to 280 kilometres an hour, and a track that circles a large knoll, edging into the valley, where the focus is on a 110-degree corner and swift elevation change.



Wendy Clark talks about the planned racetrack development and its potential future course.

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The two tracks could someday be part of a \$500-million development that includes commercial and retail space, a restaurant, conference facilities, a multistorey car storage building with 770 parking bays, and a condo complex.

Kneehill County will benefit with tax revenues, said Mr. Zelazo, and the whole area – including the dinosaur-themed tourism zone to the east in Drumheller – will attract more visitors. There also will be some resort lands set aside as an environmental reserve.

To be clear, the tracks won't be frequented by everyday folks. The Badlands Motorsports website gives directions to the area both by car and by helicopter. A one-time initiation fee for individuals starts at \$13,900, and for a corporation is \$150,000.

Mr. Zelazo said he's received inquiries from around the world, including one man from Abu Dhabi who called to ask about the track specifications and whether he could build a residence on site. "That's the kind of clientele," Mr. Zelazo said. "This is a big tourism development."

This month, the Save the Rosebud group applied for a judicial review of Alberta Environment's approval of the resort, which followed a decision by the Alberta Environmental Appeals Board.

The landowners say the board lacked the funding to carry out a proper review. They also allege, according to documents they received in an access to information request, that members were appointed with specific instructions to ensure that projects – the Badlands resort specifically named – proceed in a timely manner.

"They've been directed to push economic development ahead, above all else," said Ms. Clark.

The judicial review to the Court of King's Bench also speaks to whether Ottawa's Species at Risk Act applies in this case and to the private lands in question.



'No Racetrack' signage from the 'Save the Rosebud' group along the road that would become the secondary entrance to the racetrack.

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While declining to comment in detail about a case before the courts, Ryan Fournier, a spokesman for Environment Minister Rebecca Schulz, said the department cares deeply about Alberta's environment. He added it's "incorrect" to suggest that either the process or the Appeals Board – an independent review body – is biased.

Appeals aside, the resort now hinges on attracting tens of millions of dollars to fund the first phases of development. Mr. Zelazo is also seeking more than \$11-million in provincial funding to help build a major road to the resort. With the province facing many other transportation priorities, it's unclear whether this will be successful.

In the end, the biggest obstacle to this project might not be Alberta's courts or environmental appeals, but money.

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