

Go-Kart Tracks and Family Entertainment Centers Community Assets to be Valued

By Peter F. Olesen, P.E.

This article is written to the various plan commissions, zoning boards, town councils village boards and city councils that have the power to approve or disapprove concession go-kart facilities and related family entertainment facilities. Please review and evaluate the karts on the basis of fact and reality, not hearsay or uninformed pre-conceptions.

The almost universal appeal of go-karts at family entertainment centers around the country is a result of karts being able to be driven by children as well as adults. Karts are now safer, quieter and easier to drive.

Misconceptions:

A number of people making judgment calls on concession go-karts have based their decisions on recollections of the early karting industry. This results in assumptions that the modern go-kart industry is still the wild unregulated industry of 30 to 50 years ago. At that time karts often had no mufflers, no roll bars or seat belts, no protective shields on the belts driving the axles, minimal manual brakes and primitive (by today's standard) steering. Go-kart tracks had no fixed safety barriers, but rather used loose tires, rigid highway guard rail or wooden beams as track edges. Track surfaces ranged from sand, dirt, clay or thin layers of asphalt. Those days have been gone for more than 25 years.

Most States have enacted stringent regulations governing go-kart design and operation, based on stringent recommended standards and guidelines established in the mid-90s by the American Society for Testing Materials (ASTM), the nation's premier safety organization. These evolved from the industry's initial recognition for unified kart safety standards and track design guidelines developed in the early 90s by industry manufacturers and design consultants. These were originally compiled into what became the International Recreational Go-Kart Associations (IRGA) recommended guidelines.

Go-Karts Today have Good Safety Records:

Modern Go-karts have far safer safety records than most other forms of public recreation. They are equipped with seat belts, roll bars, cushioned wrap-around bumpers, padded steering wheels, safety shields around the engines and gears and can be equipped with automatic shutoffs to provide the operators with the ability to stop karts on the track. Modern track safety barrier design provides continuous barriers along both edges of track pavement to prevent karts from running off the tracks and pits are designed to provide safe loading and unloading of the karts.

Misconceptions:

Many people have a misguided conception that the tracks will attract undesirable patrons to their communities. A visit to most tracks in operation today will demonstrate that the riders range from pre-teen boys and girls to adults, with family units making up a large percentage of the patrons. It is in the best interest of every operator to maintain safe operating rules for their facilities, with no loitering, bad language or disruptive behavior. Failure to do so would result in loss of the largest

segment of their ridership, families and adults. The same concept applies across all attractions and amenities.

Today's guests require far more from facility operators, owners and their staffs. Failure to maintain safe equipment, safe operating rules and clean attractive facilities is not an option, but rather a necessity in order for facilities to survive, let alone succeed. It is in the best interest of every operator to be a good neighbor and an asset to the community.

Misguided Noise Assumptions:

A major misconception on the part of most of the general public is that go-karts are noisy. This may stem from their making a comparison of the perceived noise level of concession go-karts being similar to noise levels at stock car tracks. Unfortunately they are associating the noise generated by 5 ½ to 9 horsepower concession go-kart engines to the noise generated by 400 to 800 horsepower engines running with as little sound muffling as possible.

The small 5 ½ to 9 horsepower engines typically run at far less than their maximum RPMs and are equipped with mufflers to actively reduce the resulting sound. Several manufacturers offer quiet mufflers to further reduce noise emissions.

Noise comparisons made by acoustic engineers indicate that ten concession go-kart engines running at full throttle generate less decibels of noise than one typical gasoline fueled lawnmower engine. As it is unlikely that ten go-kart engines would ever be running at full throttle at any one point on the track, the assumed full throttle levels used in the comparison charts would not occur, even if karts were run at full throttle. Most kart engines are equipped with rev limiters to prevent their running at full throttle as a means of controlling maximum speeds on the go-kart tracks (typically the engines are limited to maximum engine RPM in the range of 60 to 75% of their maximum).

While it may be possible to hear stock cars a mile or more away, the reality is that most people will not hear go-karts 200 feet away. Previous studies have indicated that 10 karts running at full throttle generate noise levels of 60db at 150 feet which are similar to the noise levels experienced with normal room conversation.

The perception of kart generated noise is further reduced due to the existing ambient noise levels at most facilities due to adjacent traffic noise. Misconceptions should not dictate the prohibition of go-karts because of noise. Anyone who has a concern about noise levels should visit a nearby concession go-kart track to observe firsthand the reality of the sound generated.

This writer is confident that, if the reviewing agency gives an open and fair evaluation of the real noise levels that will occur, they will not have any serious concerns. Many facilities have been turned down because of the lack of factual information, or because the reviewing body made an arbitrary determination that the noise would be disruptive.

As an example, a number of years ago, one of our firm's clients hauled a go-kart 300 miles for the express purpose of demonstrating to the local reviewing body that in fact, karts were not noisy. The review board refused to go outside to observe the demonstration and turned down the project.

At the proposed site, no one lived within 450 feet of the proposed track and the ambient noise level at the far property line away from the adjacent highway was higher than 10 karts running at full throttle as demonstrated in the above study. In other words, no one other than the facility's guests would have ever heard the karts.

Meeting Local & State Standards:

To assure that a proposed concession go-kart track fits into the local community and becomes an asset to the community, the local body should require that the karts, track and associated facilities meet all state and local codes and safety standards; consist of buildings, landscaping and lighting that are consistent with local regulations; and that sound operating practices consistent with public safety and welfare be adhered to.

The success of modern concession go-kart tracks, miniature golf courses and family entertainment centers is dependent upon the local community's acceptance and support. This is no different than it would be for any other business seeking to open in the community.

Concession go-kart tracks today are far different than the ones developed fifteen or more years ago. They are and will continue to be assets to your community if you give them the chance. Remember there are far more people in your community that do not participate in active sports, be it junior or adult athletics, golf or other sports. Go-karts, miniature golf, bumper boats and other typical outdoor family entertainment facilities provide safe and beneficial participatory entertainment, not team oriented.

An added benefit offered by concession go-karts is that they actually contribute to the learning processes for younger drivers by gaining an understanding of the dynamics of driving a vehicle and the consequences of inattention when moving in traffic in a controlled environment. They provide a unique and entertaining driving experience for licensed drivers as well, which is demonstrated by the wide range of age groups that drive concession karts throughout the country.

Conclusions:

Family entertainment centers, miniature golf courses and stand-alone go-kart tracks provide a safe and entertaining experience in the local community that can cross relate and market with other local businesses. Far too many communities have no recreational or entertainment outlets for a large percentage of their citizens. Permitting the construction and development of these modern and safe attractions in the local community adds additional benefits, including tax revenue, jobs and a place where young people can enjoy their spare time other than drinking, drugs or other less desirable social activities.

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bumper boat ponds and related attractions. The firm has been and continues to be at the forefront of go-kart, miniature golf course and bumper boat pond design, introducing many innovations in safety, geometrics, design and construction methods now widely emulated throughout the industry.

*To date the firm has completed more than 700 projects spanning 46 states, Angola, Brunei, Canada (Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec and Saskatchewan), Cuba (Guantanamo Bay), Kazakhstan, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam. Since 1987 Mr. Olesen has exhibited at more than 100 industry trade shows. He participated as a member of the faculty of Foundations Entertainment University (49 seminar presentations over 17 years), presented more than 100 seminar presentations at the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions, FunExpo, Kart Expo and Leisure Expo, as well presenting go-kart safety seminars for the State of Ohio. He has, and continues to author articles for industry magazines and internet newsletters. For additional information on projects and services offered please refer to our web page www.fecdesigners.com or contact us at 847-561-7013 or www.peteolesen@yahoo.com.
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