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World Equestrian Games: Traffic concerns

Private firm plans to keep Lexington moving

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For many in Lexington, the biggest issue about the Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games is more mundane than beautiful horses and world-class athletes. It's about traffic, and exactly how much there will be between Sept. 25 and Oct. 10, 2010.

The answer comes from Jim Downs, a traffic expert from Gameday Management Group, the Orlando, Fla., company that has managed traffic for the past 10 Super Bowls:

"Your life will be affected," he says. "My job is to minimize it."

That job looks somewhat akin to planning the invasion of a small country, without actual weapons, but with the possibility of great aggression should something go wrong. It requires higher math skills, a finely honed sense of timing, great diplomacy and a lot of common sense.

There are the little things, for example, like checking the schedules of garbage pickups so shuttle buses don't get stuck behind a garbage truck. Downs also met recently with Fayette County Schools Superintendent Stu Silberman to learn about bus schedules, and with Toyota to talk about shift changes.

But first, the basics: Most Games spectators will park free in the fields of Coldstream Research Park, where there's room for approximately 8,500 cars. Then, free of charge, they will take shuttle buses to the Horse Park.

Downs said the exact routes are not finalized yet, but one route will probably be along Georgetown Street simply because there are more right turns, which will create better traffic flow. He estimates that, at roughly 2.5 people per car, that will take care of roughly 20,000 people.

Shuttle buses will also be running between all the hotels that are part of the WEG Housing Bureau, and the Park, moving as many as 15,000 people throughout the area. Those routes will be carefully planned and the same drivers will be used each time, so they know exactly where they're going.

All the buses will enter the Kentucky Horse Park on a yet to be constructed entry road that will skirt the front polo field and go to the bottom of the big parking lot. The WEG Foundation is expecting to lease between 200 and 400 buses. Officials would not disclose how much they expect that to cost.

For every bus, Downs said, you take 20 cars off the road. And once the routes are chosen, they will

be made public, so people can know where to expect the most traffic.

"Communication with the local community is a key piece," said Downs, who moved his family to Lexington this spring to work on this project and now hopes to stay, telecommuting to the Orlando office.

Another 3,500 cars can choose to pay for better access, parking directly at the Horse Park. Those coveted spots, directly below the campground, will cost \$100 and \$60 a day.

People will also be able to ride bikes on the Legacy Trail from downtown to Coldstream, and then straight to the Horse Park.

"The goal is to move as many people as we can as efficiently as we can," Downs said.

This is toughest, naturally, in the morning, when people are racing to get to the first events, and at the end of the day, when they want to go home. The Games' opening ceremony on Sept. 25, for example, is supposed to attract about 30,000 spectators. After it's over at 9 p.m., Downs noted, there will be many, many people who want to get to the bus area to go home.

But he calculates (this is where the math comes in) people per bus + buses per hour= moving 22,000 people an hour.

Jim Woods, deputy director of traffic engineering for the city, said that traffic flow will be helped by finishing many construction projects by next year, including the Newtown Pike extension and the widening of the interchange off Interstate 75 near the Horse Park.

Plus, Woods said, the location helps.

"This event is in the rural part of the county," he said. "It's not downtown, even though there will be a lot of events downtown, but it's far removed from the city, so that helps."

As they do for all big events, Woods' department will work with Gameday to time the stoplights on the major routes to accommodate more traffic.

Lexington police officers will also be doing traffic control all along Ironworks Pike, from the I-75 intersection to the Horse Park entrances.

Downs is not only meeting with business and civic leaders, but with plenty of neighborhood associations that may be affected by Games' traffic.

Plans will change between now and next summer, but Downs says they will get the information out there: "Local residents will know what's going on."