

TV star Bernsen in town to pitch Derby movie

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Actor Corbin Bernsen will be in town today to talk to potential investors about his vision for a movie on the All-American Soap Box Derby.

He will meet this afternoon in Fairlawn with small groups of people who have shown interest in contributing at least \$25,000 each for the movie titled *25 Hill*.

At that level, he needs 40 investors to finance his project.

"Let's see if there's a way to make this a community project and save a tradition right in its own backyard," Bernsen said Thursday.

The star of *L.A. Law*, *Major League* and *Psych* hopes the movie will rejuvenate interest in the gravity-powered racing program that has faced mounting financial troubles.

FirstMerit Bank is suing the Derby for \$580,000 in loans back to 2002, the race doesn't have a national sponsor for the third year in a row and government donations have dried up because of the economy.

Staff hours have been cut to part time. Derby President Jim Huntsman continues to be under doctor's orders to work only part time, as well.

"Mr. Derby" Jeff Iula, probably the best-known face of the organization, left in November.

Bernsen said his Derby-themed screenplay might be one way to pull the organization back from the brink. The movie would generate a licensing fee and lots of free publicity for the youth racing program.

"There's nothing like a film to rejuvenate interest," he said. "How many people became lawyers because of *L.A. Law*?"

He tentatively plans to shoot part of the movie in Akron in April and during the 73rd All-American race this summer. Some local residents would serve as actors and in production.

If investors are slower to come in than he hopes, he could film the international race in July and return in the fall to film the balance when his other commitments are over.

Bernsen said he has received about 20 e-mails from people who would like to be production assistants — in essence, "free hands on deck" who would learn how to make a movie.

"I've had some pledges, and they all have the proper documents. So that's where we are now," he said.

Yet while he's 99.9 percent sure that *25 Hill* is a go, he also wants to be sure the Derby has a future.

He said he asks himself: "Do I really want to make a movie if the Derby isn't going to exist? I hope the bank sees this as a way to recoup its money."

He said he tries to do one film project, and, this year, it's the Derby film.

"It would be very disappointing for me that we didn't accomplish our goal in saving the Derby, and it would be a shame. This is a really good little script, a good little story," he said. "It's very important for me to get it done."

Bernsen arrived in Akron on Thursday and met with one group of investors in the afternoon.

His visit is being coordinated by the Greater Akron Chamber of Commerce.

"The Chamber has an interest in how it can support the Derby and the brand," said President Dan Colantone. "Many people in the Chamber want to help."
