

# Blazing new trails

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GARYSBURG — As far as ride and handling courses go it was a christening by fire with dozens of speed demons blazing over its surface.

This past weekend, the North Carolina Center for Automotive Research (NCCAR) welcomed the National Auto Sport Association (NASA) Southeast Division, whose drivers tested their skills on the facility's 2.1 mile riding and handling course.

Approximately 80-90 entrants participating in NASA's high performance driving event put the pedal to the metal on the course. The program teaches drivers how to handle their vehicles at a high rate of speed and allows them to build up their skill level.

The two-day NASA event, which was open to the public, marked the first large event for NCCAR.

While the facility is geared towards automotive industry testing, NCCAR Chief Operating Officer Simon Cobb said events such as NASA's will be supplementary.

Phase 1A of NCCAR is nearing completion, but officials with the project were able to pull together a few loose ends at the site to make it workable for the NASA event.

Cobb said the wet weather in previous months slowed down construction work at the site, but the recent week of dry weather allowed more to be done as well as preparing the site for NASA's event.

As of Saturday, the foundation layer of the asphalt had been laid on the roadways and since then another layer has been added. The administration/operations building which features six client garages has also been completed along with the security kiosk at the entrance of the property. Of the 620 acres at the site, 155 have already been developed.

According to Northampton County Economic Development Director Gary Brown, a third layer of asphalt on the roadways will soon be laid. Shoulder improvements, a punch-list of items for the buildings and system tests will soon follow in order to completely finish Phase 1A.

NCCAR officials have worked closely with NASA for months on the event. They first met up with the organization at a performance industry trade show.

Jim Pantas, NASA Southeast regional director, said in the past six months the organization made three or four trips to the site to work with NCCAR officials on the event.

“We would suggest different things, mainly safety items,” he said.

While NASA came with their own crew, local volunteers also made the event possible. Garysburg Fire Department, Roanoke Valley Rescue Squad and Northampton Emergency Medical Services were on hand in case of an emergency. A safe viewing area of the track for drivers’ families and the public was also constructed.

NASA drivers, categorized in four groups according to their skill level, went out on the course in 20 minute intervals. Before getting started, the groups met for a morning class session, utilizing a conference room at the administration/operations building.

Instructors rode along with beginner drivers while the highest skilled drivers took to the course solo. Each of the drivers brought their own vehicle.

Pantas, who drove his own vehicle around the course, was impressed with the track.

“I love it,” he said.

He noted the facility is well-located to a number of amenities including the Halifax-Northampton Airport and Interstate 95 as well as Roanoke Rapids.

“Everything is very convenient,” said Pantas about NCCAR. “Every track we go we usually drive 20 to 30 miles (to restaurants and hotels).”

Pantas noted NASA will be returning for another event in September.

Brown said in the interim other similar types of organizations will be holding events at NCCAR.

Feedback from clients like NASA is music to NCCAR officials and supporters ears.

“The response we received from NASA indicates the time and effort devoted to planning and designing has proven worth it,” said Brown.

“It’s been a long time in the making,” said Cobb. “It’s good to get feedback from people.”

Brown said construction cost stands at \$16.5 million for Phase 1A of NCCAR.

Plans for the facility beyond Phase 1A include completion of the ride and handling course with an additional 2.55 miles of demanding road systems with 30 feet of elevation change and two turning circles; extended vehicle dynamics area (integrated with the course) –

total size will be 670 feet by 670 feet (approximately 9.2 acres); and a second, and larger, vehicle dynamics area with acceleration roads for peripheral and central approach. The vehicle dynamics area is approximately 2,400 feet in length by 830 feet wide (approximately 37 acres). A new Operations and Engineering building with client leasable offices and garages; climatic chamber with full vehicle performance and emissions (individual wheel control); and an engine combustion laboratory are also planned.

Cobb said Wi-Fi will be another important aspect of NCCAR's future with the ability for a live stream from the car on the track back to the conference rooms.