

# MISSOULIAN

## Planning firm likely to handle fair's future

By *KEILA SZPALLER of the Missoulian 8-15-2008*

A public hearing before the Missoula County commissioners Wednesday turned into a resounding pat on the back for the city's downtown planning consultants.

Crandall Arambula is “unbelievably easy to work with,” said Rod Austin, director of the downtown business improvement district.

“I think they're a great choice,” said Tim Winger, president of the Missoula Midtown Association.

“I was very impressed with this firm when we met with them, so I think you picked a great firm to work with,” testified Kim Latrielle, CEO and president of the Missoula Area Chamber of Commerce.

The occasion was a speedy hearing on the county's intention to hire Crandall Arambula for another job in this neck of the woods - planning for the future of the Missoula County Fairgrounds and Western Montana Fair.

Eyebrows were raised in May when the county opened discussions with Crandall Arambula without soliciting public input, said Dale Bickell, the county's chief administrative officer. Wednesday's session was to correct that.

It was the first public hearing addressing fair planning since commissioners disbanded the fair board a few weeks after the 2007 fair. The county has already organized a technical assistance team and identified dozens of stakeholder groups for the project.

Commissioners will approve a contract with the Portland, Ore.-based firm at an administrative meeting Thursday morning. The contract requires Crandall Arambula to provide services starting in November and ending in September 2009 to map out the fair's future.

Bickell called Crandall Arambula “the perfect fit.”

“They're already pretty connected to the entire community” through their work with the downtown plan, he added. Crandall Arambula also has experience in fair planning in Nebraska and Oregon.

Commissioner Larry Anderson said on a visit to Nebraska he talked to people involved with Crandall Arambula's project there.

“They were very pleased with the work that Crandall Arambula had done in that process,” Anderson said. “It involved moving the state fair from Lincoln out to Grand Island, so it was a little bit bigger project than what we're envisioning here.”

The county's contract with Crandall Arambula requires the company to develop three conceptual master plan alternatives for the existing 47-acre site, where the 2008 fair wrapped up Sunday. It'll also develop three “programming” alternatives for a fair at a new site.

The county will pay the company for six, three-person trips to Missoula, the first in November and the last to present its final product to commissioners in mid-September 2009.

A proposed timeline slates the first public meeting in March to discuss alternatives for the fair at the current site, and a second around fair time next August, where new fairground sites will be addressed.

Crandall Arambula will also hold stakeholder meetings on two of its trips and meet with commissioners and the county's technical advisory committee several times. Implementation of a final plan will be covered either by county staff or through a separate contract, Bickell said.

Austin said the Oregon company is good at getting folks together.

“I think we figured that in their last visit, we were approaching 600 individuals they have met in stakeholder meetings or in our workshop meetings,” he said. “They see the master plan as a community issue.”

Anderson urged the community to jump in.

“We want this to be open to as many people as possible,” he said, “and we encourage (participation by) everybody - individuals, groups, associations. Everybody in Missoula County has a stake in this, so we want to hear from them and hopefully provide and give us the input we need in the process.”

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