

MISSOULIAN

Planning firm hears ideas for future of fair

By KIM BRIGGEMAN of the Missoulian
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If the Western Montana Fair has lost its luster for some, it hasn't diminished their passion - or their eloquence.

George Crandall and Don Arambula are hearing plenty of both Tuesday and Wednesday at the fairgrounds. It's the first of three scheduled visits for the planning firm of Crandall Arambula out of Portland, Ore., and on Tuesday the challenge of their task took shape.

The fair is an irreplaceable part of the fabric of Missoula, they were told. It's a given the fair must be sustained, they heard. It's not a given the fair has to be at the current fairgrounds.

The history and the agricultural aspects of the fair are vital components. The fair can't sustain itself financially without significant changes.

"If you take the racetrack away, you're the bad guys," horse racing aficionado Kim Bagnell said. "You're going to leave a bad taste in all of our mouths."

They are many of the same points that bounced around town and the county in 2006 and 2007, as the since-disbanded fair commission developed a master plan for the fairgrounds that went kerplunk at the county commission level.

"To build consensus, that's your challenge," said Steve King, Missoula's Public Works director. And it will be.

Crandall said the focus will be on the 46-acre grounds, but adjacent city, university and public school land must be examined, too. There are dynamics involved in an urban renewal area around Brooks Street north and west of the fairgrounds that must be weighed in any planning process.

Crandall, Arambula and associate principal Jason Graf started their afternoon dodging raindrops on a walking tour of the grounds guided by fair manager Scott Meader. Then they sat down to meet with County Commissioners Bill Carey and Larry Anderson, as well as the county's technical advisory committee. Next they had a sometimes feisty sitdown with three dozen horse racing advocates, including three members of the state Board of Horse Racing and the board's executive secretary, Ryan Sherman.

The evening was topped off by meetings with groups of fair and ice rink users.



On Wednesday, Crandall Arambula will hear the Missoula Area Chamber of Commerce's ideas for a multi-use exhibition center. They'll meet with Missoula business interests and a group that is developing a concept of a Central Park in Missoula that includes the fairgrounds, followed by representatives of historic preservation, regular renters and, finally, the Fort Missoula Regional Park.

Crandall said his people are going into the process with no preconceived notions. "We know nothing right now," he said.

They'll take all the input on the fair's future back to Portland, sift through it and come up with three preliminary proposals. When they come back in March, those proposals will be floated at more meetings with the public. They'll then be refined and finalized by July. After that, the whole process begins again, this time to address the future of the fairgrounds site.

Crandall Arambula, which helped develop Missoula's downtown master plan, has done this kind of fair planning before - in Lincoln, Neb., and in Salem, Ore. "You have many of the same issues here," Crandall said. "As we walked around this afternoon it was like walking around the Oregon State Fairgrounds."

Discussion often slipped across the boundary between fair planning and fair site planning.

"I think a vibrant fair is critically important to the community," said Carey at one point. "I'm not so sure it has to be on this site. There is ground the county owns outside of town and it might work as a truly historical kind of fair if you move some of the historical buildings out there, that sort of thing."

Affordable housing is a community need that might fit the description of highest and best use of the fairgrounds land, he added.

"I see almost like a village within this ground, with reduced car use, if any, in the interior," Carey said. "I have no idea whether that would work or not."

Racing fans decried the absence of their sport at the fair these past two Augusts, along with the loss of other "staples." "Too many traditions have absolutely vanished," Val Crossland said, adding, "We have to get (racing) back. It's part of the ambience of the fair." "As a trainer, I miss it really, really badly," said Al Carruthers of Butte, the chairman of the state racing board.

"It seems like everything that has to do with horses is just about gone now," agreed Jeff Patterson of the Missoula County Sheriff's Posse. "We have an asset here. The (racetrack) is a huge asset to the community. To not include it in your plan would be irresponsible."

"We raise some nice animals around here, but we have no venue to race them," said Cliff Larsen.

"There's a track, it's not being used. We have horses and trainers. We have people who want to go to the horse races. Until you decide what to do with our track, let us use it."

Reporter Kim Briggeman can be reached at 523-5266 or at kbriggeman@missoulia.com.