

# MISSOULIAN

## Fairgrounds: New street through property in 3 scenarios

By Kim Briggeman of the Missoulian, April 29, 2009

Maybe the Missoula County Fairgrounds will always remain on its 46-acre island inside the city of Missoula. Maybe it won't.

What Crandall Arambula brings to town Wednesday are three site alternatives that address the first possibility, said Jason Graf, project manager for the Portland, Ore., consulting firm.

Two options provide space for an exposition center of up to 170,000 square feet. One keeps intact the existing horse racetrack.

There are some common threads to all three. The Glacier Ice Rink would remain intact. So would a couple of historic buildings, including the 1914 vintage Commercial Building. The historic footprint of the grounds would be preserved throughout, although to varying degrees. And in each alternative, a street runs through it.

A local street connecting Fairview on the west and Stephens Avenue on the east could be closed during fair time, Graf said. "It's not a high-volume street, but it would allow a little bit of fluidity" through the midtown region, he said.

Crandall Arambula was hired by Missoula County to plan for the fair site, but there's a bigger area at play here. "We also need to look at it in connection with midtown and some of these major auto and pedestrian connections," Graf said.

According to a fundamental concept drawing, the connecting street would run through the current paddock, grandstand and beer garden. It would meet Stephens Avenue near the University of Montana's College of Technology and to Fairview at Russell Street, near the current west gate of the fairgrounds.

Fairview runs west across Brooks to Southgate Mall.

"What we're really looking at is how can we bridge the fair site with the mall," he said. That might create an opportunity for a 'commercial main street' to stimulate economic activity in that part of town.

"You'll also see, on the periphery, multifamily housing," Graf said. "We think increasing housing close to schools and parks is probably a good idea. There are some areas along Russell and Stephens (in which) I just think you might want to encourage that over time."

**Crandall Arambula's** primary mission from the county is to generate revenue at the fairgrounds site. Preserving the history of the Western Montana Fair site is a second charge.

A third, Graf said, is to improve connections throughout the fair planning area - to Sentinel High School to the east and Playfair Park to the southeast and south. That includes removing barriers such as fences that thwart "a really expansive public area."

The concept was developed by the Central Park Group over the past 10 years and was formally introduced to Crandall Arambula in its meetings with user groups last December.

“We're trying to knit together all these different ideas,” Graf said. One alternative will be to keep the racetrack. “There has certainly been a desire to do that,” Graf said. The grandstand, paddock area and beer garden would have to be moved for the Fairview-Stephens connection, he added. A second option presents the site without racing but keeping its “historical bent.”

“We say, hey, let's keep the shadow of the racetrack and use that as a promenade and a real feature for new revenue generators,” Graf said. “Those might be a new rodeo, or potentially an exposition or a livestock exhibit area.”

The third alternative considers the fairgrounds and its surrounding area as a grid.

“We aren't as focused on all the historical aspects, though the Commercial Building and the former ‘Ag Palace’ would be preserved in any alternative,” Graf said. “But this one would be more about creating a more fluid street system through the site.”

In the second and third alternatives, land has been identified for a large exposition center, a concept that's being championed by an advisory committee headed by Kim Latrielle of the Missoula Area Chamber of Commerce, a former fair board trustee. Crandall Arambula will meet with the committee Wednesday at 2 p.m.

“We're not totally sure what they want to do, and there are certain limitations to the site” such as future expansion and parking, Graf said. “There are probably several sites around the city that should be considered for that. We're just saying this is one, and if you did do it here, this is how it might come together.”

**Crandall Arambula** is making its second visit to Missoula to plan the fairgrounds. The first in early December consisted of a site tour and a series of meetings with user groups. Input from that visit resulted in the three site alternatives to be unveiled Wednesday.

This one-day trip culminates in an early evening “public workshop,” where interested parties can weigh in on the alternatives via response sheets. Out of this meeting and subsequent feedback from the public, from a local steering committee and from county staff, a single preferred alternative will be formulated, Graf said. It will be presented to county commissioners “probably around June or July.”

Then part two of the planning process kicks in - a look at the fair in a different location. That will begin in August or September. “That site is so critical where it is today. As a fair site, it's got some real positives because it's centrally located in the community,” said Graf.

It would also be an advantageous location for other things, however.

“I think the critical thing is how do you preserve the history of that site as the original Western Montana Fair? I think we've found several different ways of doing that,” Graf said. “Even if the fair were to transition to another area, we think we can preserve a lot of the footprints and the history that have established that site over time.”

### **Fair talk**

Missoula County invites the public to weigh in on three site concepts for the fairgrounds at a public workshop Wednesday from 5:30-7 p.m. at the Home Arts Building inside the main gate off South Avenue.