

MISSOULIAN

Fairgrounds: Proposals presented to public

By Kim Briggeman of the Missoulian, April 30, 2009

Folks in Missoula County have some clear choices on the future of their fairgrounds.

Their options were laid out for the first time Wednesday in black and white, and green, and yellow, and red and purple for all to see.

“We can turn on a dime, we can change things, we can do anything quickly,” promised George Crandall of Crandall Arambula, the firm appointed to lead planning for the fairgrounds and the Western Montana Fair.

Those who want to keep the historic horse racetrack will vote for Option 1, which Crandall Arambula calls “Racetrack.”

Those who don't, and who want to see instead a large exposition center where the track sits now will prefer either the “Promenade” option or the “Grid.”

There are plenty of other nuances, of course. A limited-speed street crosses the grounds in all three plans. The historic two-level Commercial and Culinary (formerly 4-H buildings) will remain in place. There's room for the popular Glacier Ice Arena to expand, no matter which option is chosen.

Some 60 citizens showed up at the public unveiling of Crandall Arambula's work, which will be refined into a preferred option and presented to county commissioners in July or August. All three commissioners attended Wednesday's meetings.

[View a map of the proposed street through the fairgrounds](#)

Of the half dozen people who voiced their preferences following a colorful PowerPoint presentation and small-group discussions, three leaned toward the Promenade and two to keeping the racetrack. Maxine Lane of the Five Valleys Kennel Club liked the Grid option best, “but the Promenade excites us, too.”

The latter seeks to maintain a “shadow” of the race track with a promenade, while providing room enough in the current infield for a rodeo grounds and a 160,000-square foot exposition center.

The Grid option provides the same space for rodeo and even more (180,000 square feet) for an expo center. It gives the grounds an east-west orientation and opens up more green space.

“Our preferred version is the Promenade, partly because it seems like in the long term it would give the fair an opportunity to expand and open up the grounds to more revenue-generating possibilities,” said one man.

“None of these options here are necessarily terrible options, but for the long-term welfare of the Western Montana Fair, I think it's really important that they make a real effort to maintain the horse racing here,” said Jeff Stevens of Missoula. “They need to identify ways to get the racing reinstated because I think

horse racing has the tradition of being the heart and soul of the Western Montana Fair.”

Lane said the kennel club is looking for the kind of room an expo center and more open space could provide.

“We are desperate at this point for a year-round facility,” Lane said.

Peter Lambros works with the Central Park Group that promotes a tie between the fairgrounds and adjacent public lands. He called the Promenade concept “probably the most creative and useful solution here.”

“It accommodates the potential uses of both the fair and exhibitions, but also leaves the entire site feeling more connected than the Grid option does,” he said.

All three plans face a challenge of adequate on-site parking, and none of them adequately address the need for horse stables, Crandall admitted. There are myriad other details to be combed out, he added.

“You see that all three make substantial improvements over your existing condition, some more so than others. Do you have deal breakers in here? I don't think so. A lot of it has to do with your observations tonight and your feedback.”

Lambros commended the planners on their “creativity of a very complex site.”

“The options you give I think provide this community the opportunity to decide what's a priority.”

Seeking comment

To view details of the three site alternatives and to fill out a response sheet, go to westernmontanafair.com and click on “Fair/Fairgrounds Planning” or call the fairgrounds at 721-3247.