

ARE FAIRS AND FAIRGROUNDS RELEVANT?

We all start asking questions like that when our budget gets strained. Do we really need that subscription to Sports Illustrated, or even the local paper? I guess the real answer is, no. We would survive without that subscription, and we could survive without a fair. But that wasn't the question, was it? Are any of those things relevant to our county?

Some would say time is up for our fairgrounds. It is an apparently expensive piece of property to maintain and it doesn't generate enough cash to pay for itself. Maybe the problem is efficiency. Maybe this is just another government facility that is running fat and the time has come to cut the fat? All are valid questions that should be asked. Let me try to answer them.

The existence of the Plumas Sierra County Fair and the fairgrounds is absolutely relevant. If from only a traditional point of view, they are relevant. This is the one event and location in Plumas County that represents every community, industry and person of the entire county. It has done so for most of our lifetimes. Whether we know it or not, every time we walk under those logs at the front gate, we are acknowledging the reasons we exist as a county. When you drive along Lee Road and see those barns and corrals, you are seeing a representation of a still vibrant lifestyle in places like Sierra and Indian Valleys. We have a building called the Mineral Building. There's a reason for that. Just because we take these signs for granted, doesn't mean they are not relevant.

Each community in Plumas County has something to be proud of. But name something unique to the whole county, that we are all proud of. It's a short list, but any list is going to have our fairgrounds on it. Folks, I've been to many fairgrounds, ours is a gem. Every one of us who has spent any amount of time at our fairgrounds has had to have felt that pride as they walked down the lane by the family gardens under a canopy of leafy trees. Most will agree that the fairgrounds are a wonderful representation of the natural beauty of Plumas County.

As an event center, it can hold up to facilities much larger. If an ongoing economic goal of our county is to lure visitors here, we are way ahead of the curve with the fairgrounds. Events at the fairgrounds draw tens of thousands of visitors to Plumas County. Four major meeting halls, barns & stalls for hundreds of animals, large open grassy areas, a large horse arena, a covered arena, a 3000 seat grandstand with racetrack, and parking for hundreds of cars. Oh yeah, a couple hundred RV and camping sites. Wait! We have a go-kart track too. And some cool historical buildings. Alright, I'll stop there. Let me take just one aspect of those assets. We've had natural disasters before; fires and floods. Where does a community take animals in those situations? Even people. Where do several hundred people go in an emergency situation? The fairgrounds have bathroom facilities, showers, even a kitchen. When you need that sort of facility at that time, you don't have to ask about relevancy.

I guess the real question is, "Is it worth it?" These fairgrounds generate a huge amount of money, but not all of it goes to the fairgrounds. I've shared the figures before; over \$6

million in total economic activity, the equivalent of 79 full time jobs, \$96,000 in direct tax benefit to the County and State. However, in revenues and hard cash, it comes up short. In the past, the State has made up that shortage, but that resource is now in serious doubt. That leaves three other sources; the County, donations and increased revenue. I can assure everyone, I've worked non-stop on ideas to improve our revenue. We have some real exciting projects in the works, but we just might not have the time to get those off the ground. As for donations, well, our community has always been generous but we all know this isn't the best time to be out panhandling. That leaves the County.

The fairgrounds are not the only entity looking to the County for funding. Our Board of Supervisors have a long list of programs they have to consider. The Board, and the public, want to know if their money is being spent frugally. Over the past two years, the fairgrounds have become the poster child for frugal. Consider as recently as ten years ago, this fairgrounds had a maintenance staff of 4 full time employees with 12 seasonal workers. We currently have one full time maintenance person and maybe 2 seasonal workers. What's even more interesting, we generate more revenue now. Anyone who rents any part of our fairgrounds are given personal attention, which means someone (by that I mean Oran Morrison) usually meets them, opens any buildings or restrooms, has tables and chairs set up and then cleans up for the next tenant. This goes on 7 days a week, all year long. Meanwhile, lawns get mowed, weeds trimmed, repairs made, horse arenas groomed, manure shoveled and bathrooms cleaned. Sometimes we get inmate help or community service workers, but a staff of one does all this with a positive attitude. So yes, the public's money is being spent frugally. I can tell you, there's no fat on the fairground's bones.

But that still doesn't answer the question, "Is it worth it?" What do you think? If we have a valuable facility that is being run as efficiently as possible, but still needs financial help, do we spend the money? I will tell you, we have some ideas, almost all of them are ways to generate more revenue. Even then, it is a very slim chance the Plumas Sierra County Fairgrounds will be self sufficient, at least in the next few years. I would like to see that happen, but we need more time, and time is money.