



OC Fairgrounds Equestrian Center plans for permanence and growth.

by Kim F. Miller

The Orange County Fair & Event Center board of directors voted to keep the property's Equestrian Center during its May 24 meeting. Southern California horse owners were delighted and relieved by that, while also steeling themselves to stay vigilant in advocating for the Costa Mesa boarding and training facility's long-term existence and, ideally, its expansion.



Led by the Orange County Fair Preservation Society, with a new "Do The Fair Thing" motto, advocates had a bold response to the demolition threat that arose with Master Site Plans revealed earlier this year. (See story, California Riding Magazine, June issue). Part 1 of that response was retaining the existing stabling for 180 horses and part 2 is an attempt to expand the now 7.5 acre facility back to its original 15 acres and bringing more horses and horse-related activities in.

A June 21 meeting of the OCFEC Equestrian Center Ad Hoc Committee meeting set a positive, proactive and pragmatic tone for accomplishing those two goals. Chaired by Fair Board member

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and horsewoman Ashleigh Aitken, the committee encouraged attendees to join the “collaborative” effort. The goal, Ashleigh said, was to gather input from all stakeholders over the coming months, research feasibility and costs, then present a cohesive, realistic plan to the Fair Board at its October meeting.

She acknowledged that “a lot of good ideas are coming in” but said that cost benefit analysis were required, along with a willingness from everyone involved to collaborate, prioritize and compromise. “We probably will not agree on everything but hopefully the majority of our stakeholders will feel their voice has been heard and that the process will be as transparent as possible.”

Immediate concerns included addressing various safety issues: namely, bringing the Equestrian Center up to current standards and codes for fire safety and electrical needs. Other Fairgrounds buildings were described as needing similar updates.

Better communication between trainers, boarders, operators, Fair staff and the community is a big picture priority. So is integrating equestrian activities with the rest of the Fairgrounds, year round and especially during the annual Fair, set this year for July 13-August 12. At the June Equestrian Center Ad Hoc meeting, Fair Board chairman Barbara Bagneris seemed excited about expanding community access through various horse-related activities, like therapeutic riding programs. She even said she was not opposed to the Fairgrounds owning horses if that was required to ensure community access.

The meeting’s tone was a 180-degree turn from an April full board meeting when angry equestrians filled the day-long session to protest Master Site Plan proposals for demolishing the Equestrian Center. Weekly meetings of boarders, led by Fairgrounds trainer Lisa Sabo, have helped create the new, positive attitude toward horse boarding and activity at the Fairgrounds. That work is funneling into the OCFEC Equestrian Center Ad Hoc Committee, which plans informal monthly meetings to strategize, assign tasks and share findings in advance of presenting firm ideas to the full Fair board in October. Veteran equestrian advocate Theresa Sears is community liaison for the Ad Hoc Committee, which also includes Fair Board members Stan Tkaczyk and Sandra Cervantes.

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