

Three County Fair Closes for the Winter Amidst Cutbacks and Furloughs

*America's Longest Running On-Going Agricultural Fair Takes Steps to
Reduce Expenses During Extended Shutdown*

- Wednesday, December 23, 2020 -

Northampton, MA – The Three County Fair has closed its office for the winter season and instituted staff cuts and furloughs to help the 202-year-old organization survive the extended shutdown of the fairgrounds due to the COVID-19 health crisis. The cuts will affect each staff member, and includes a fourteen percent salary reduction for senior management, and staggered furloughs for all employees. Furloughs could be extended if the fairgrounds are unable to host postponed 2020 events in the spring, which include over a dozen different horse shows from April through October, plus a variety of concerts and festivals.

The Three County Fair entered 2020 on solid ground after completing 2019 as its most successful year since horse racing ended at the fairgrounds in 2005, thanks to a widely attended Labor Day weekend Fair, and another full slate of horse shows and festivals. But with reoccurring operational expenses and more than one million dollars in lost 2020 event revenue, the Fair will run out of reserves sooner rather than later.

“Like the majority of businesses, 2020 has been a struggle and we have been cutting operational expenses since the shutdown, but we are now activating contingency plans that will extend our lifespan a little longer” said James Przypek, General Manager of the Three County Fair. “The organization would be out of money already if it weren’t for the original Federal CARES Act, the Fair’s vision to invest in a solar system more than eight years ago, a prominent winter storage business, along with the generosity of many of our Directors” continued Przypek.

The Fair received a Small Business Administration Paycheck Protection Loan in mid-May, which has since been exhausted and forgiven by its lender and the SBA. “The PPP Loan was a blessing” said Przypek, “it allowed us to keep everyone employed and work non-stop with our event partners preparing to host events under the state’s guidelines over the summer and into the fall. But the delayed Massachusetts Phase 3 reopening, along with the Governor Baker’s rollback of gathering sizes for events, and travel advisories this summer forced all of those events to postpone or relocate to other venues with less restrictive guidelines. Those actions effectively crippled our organization for years to come” stated Przypek.

Even with its challenges, Fair officials are most proud of being able to organize two different events in 2020 that benefitted the community. The Fair held a food drive on May 9 that collected more than 2,000 pounds of food for local pantries in the three Western Mass counties the Fair represents. And the other occurred over Labor Day weekend at the fairgrounds. “We hosted our 203rd consecutive Three County Fair” said Przypek. The Fair was closed to the public, we implemented extensive virus mitigation protocols and operated only a handful of agricultural competitions to comply with the state’s gathering size orders.

“We had our baking, arts and craft competitions for adults and kids, plus youth dairy, oxen, rabbit and sheep shows. It was extremely rewarding to give kids that opportunity to continue their education and involvement in agriculture, plus the arts and other skills. The feedback we received from the participants and on social media was tremendous. But at the same time, it was extremely bittersweet because the fairgrounds are comprised of more than fifty acres of wide-open outdoor spaces and over a dozen open-air barn buildings. And we were limited to no more than 25 people in a building and no more than 50 people on the property at one time” summarized Przypek.

Przypek further explained that reopening to horse shows in the spring of 2021 will be critical for the organization. “Horse show events have successfully operated during the pandemic in neighboring states including Connecticut, New Hampshire, New York, Vermont and even in other Massachusetts communities with protocols in place. We have been very frustrated with local and state officials who keep changing the standards for businesses, public and private gatherings. They are not familiar with the amount of outdoor space, and large open-air facilities we have on the grounds, or how horse shows are events that are spaced out with competitions taking place throughout the day and in different areas with few spectators.”

The fairgrounds was also holding out for hope in the form The Agricultural Fairs Rescue Act (H.R. 7883), which was introduced to Congress on July 30, a bi-partisan bill from Representatives Jimmy Panetta (D) of California, and Billy Long (R) of Missouri. The legislation would provide \$500 million dollars in grant funding to rescue fair organizations like the non-profit, Three County Fair. “The bill has over fifty congressional co-sponsors since it was first presented, including Congressmen Richard Neal and James McGovern locally. We need this bill passed badly. We have applied for other grants this year and have not been successful. The original CARES Act was a step to stabilize the economy for the first few months of the crisis, but now we are looking at almost a year of minimal business while inaction and partisanship continues in Washington. Without the Agricultural Fairs Rescue Act or additional stimulus for non-profits, I fear that our organization, which has survived for more than two centuries may be no more” concluded Przypek.

About the Hampshire, Franklin & Hampden County Agricultural Society:

Located in Northampton, Massachusetts and incorporated in 1818, the Hampshire, Franklin & Hampden County Agricultural Society promotes agriculture, agricultural education, agricultural science and sustainability for the region through exhibitions, displays, competitions and demonstrations and annually operates The Three County Fair, recognized by the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture as the oldest on-going Fair in continuous operation in the U.S.A, with the first Three County Fair taking place, October 14-15, 1818 and every year since without interruption.

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