

June 5, 2020

The mission of the Wisconsin Association of Fairs is to increase Wisconsin fairs quality by providing education and advice on all aspects of producing a fair in Wisconsin, mainly through our annual convention and district meetings. Because of COVID-19, we've had to adjust the way in which we communicate with our members. Since the last week in March, we've been meeting with our Fair Members weekly to provide education and advice on all aspects of producing a fair in this new environment.



In addition, we have approximately 175 Associate Members, and we reached out to them as well, to share updates on what our Fair Members are discussing. We provided them information where to get the latest updates regarding COVID-19 and how it affects the fairs.

It occurred to me one day, seeing comments on social media regarding a fair cancellation, that if you are not on a Fair Board of one of our 75 county, district or state fairs, you might not fully understand what all goes into making a successful fair. I felt compelled to share the aspects of producing a fair in Wisconsin.

A favorite fair media promotion of mine, used by our fairs to highlight upcoming events, is a picture of a grand champion ribbon sitting on top of a pie. With that thought in mind, let me compare the fair to that of a grand champion pie. Humor me.

When you eat a slice of a pie, your thoughts likely go to how delicious it is. But do you ever really dig in and think about all the ingredients that go into it? Probably not. You're just thankful that someone knows how to bake a really good pie, right? I'm guessing a pie made by someone just beginning to make pies doesn't taste as good as a pie made by a seasoned veteran. It takes time to learn how to make them better. A successful fair is not created in just a couple of months before the fair. Most fairs take a minimum of a year to plan, sometimes longer.

Would you agree that no two pies ever taste exactly the same? Admit it, we always tweak the recipe in some way whether we plan to or not. But that's what makes them unique. You can change an ingredient here or there and end up with a different result. A fair is the same. Each fair is unique in their ingredients, that is what makes them so great. Otherwise every week of the summer we'd attend the same fair. So what ingredients go into making a fair?

Let's start with the pie shell, the foundation and structure of the pie. In the fair world...Where is the fair held? Who manages the fair? Who owns the grounds? Who has the final say if a fair can be held? The answers to those questions are different for every fair. During our weekly meetings, what we've been learning is that although the fair is the one that makes the final announcement to cancel or proceed, a lot of county and city entities have provided opinions and recommendations regarding holding the fair and procedures that need to be followed if the fair is held. For instance, all fairs have been asked to communicate with their local health departments. Conversations have

recognized that fairs are doing really great planning, but they don't know if the fair can be approved until it comes closer. Food permits, beer licenses, noise ordinance permits, etc. are all approved by either the city or county where the fair takes place. Some emergency personnel like first responders, security, and ambulance services, might not be available or may have some restrictions. These are all things that fairs need take into consideration, but at times, may not have control over.

The next part of the pie is the filling. Admit it, each person has their personal favorite flavor, but all require some pretty standard ingredients to make it taste the best it can. Miss one and your pie flavor changes. Like the filling, all the ingredients of a fair are important, miss one and it can make the fair run inefficiently. What makes up the filling for a fair? The carnival, the entertainment, the exhibits (junior, open and senior), the vendors (food and trinket), the sponsors, the volunteers, the judges, and the patrons.

Let's break down the filling a little more....

- Carnival: the carnival industry is one that moves from city to city to conduct their business. They are dependent on their route to keep expenses down. If too many events cancel early in the season, will it be fiscally responsible to travel to later events? Will they have enough workers to staff their show? What safety procedures will they need to have in place? Will patrons wait longer for rides to be cleaned? Or will they not come out at all?
- Entertainment: Entertainers come to the fair to entertain, but will people still come to your fair to be entertained? How engaged will they be able to get with the audiences? If you go to see an entertainer in the grandstand, can you keep social distancing in place and still cover the cost of the entertainment?
- Vendors: Traveling from event to event is the livelihood for most vendors. They rely on fairs to bring in patrons. In return they provide a great product for patrons to take home or fill their belly. In addition, community service groups usually have their own vendor spot. Fairs are where they raise a lot of their funds to give back in scholarships and programming for the majority of the year.
- Exhibits: Kids and adults of all ages work on projects, some for an entire year. The fair is the place where they can showcase their work. Yes, they receive some premium award money and/or ribbons, but it's never enough to cover costs of raising or making their project. It's more about the pride of being recognized for their hard work and the education they learned by doing the project.
- Sponsors: Sponsors are a vital part of every fair. In fact, some of the other ingredients mentioned above, wouldn't happen without them. Yes, there are sponsors who are up for the task of sponsoring your fair this year, but there are some that are just trying to figure out how to keep their business open, their families fed, and their bills paid. They have supported your fairs for the past how many years. This is the time to thank them for their support by supporting their business.
- Volunteers: Are your volunteers willing to volunteer this year? What safety measures do you need to put in place to keep them safe? Can you find additional volunteers to help cover the extra jobs created by the guidelines and recommendations?
- Judges: Many fairs have been exploring options to do virtual judging. Do your judges even want to do virtual judging? Do they want to still come to your fair and judge? If you do

traditional judging, what safety measures do you need to put in place to make it work for everyone attending.

- Patrons: How many patrons will be coming out to your fair this year? This is one area that is hard to really guess at. Can a fair be successful if only 50% of the patrons come to the fair this year?

Now let's look at how you bake it? There is a correct time and temperature to bake your pie. In the fair world, sometimes the correct time might be the advance you need to cancel a contract and still come out ahead. Admit it, if you don't bake a pie properly, you could get sick. What type of safety measures do fairs have to put in place this year to give attendees the feeling of being safe? Can they find enough supplies? Can they afford them once they find them?

And lastly is the toppings on the pie. To add a crust or not? Add a scoop of ice cream or whip cream? The optional things that you never know until your friends come to share the pie. In the fair world...Will people still attend? Will businesses come to support auctions or be sponsors? Will there be a change in social gatherings tomorrow or in two weeks? You just don't know until the fair gets closer.

When a fair makes adjustments to what the fair traditionally offered to you, or they cancel, keep in mind they have looked at all the ingredients to make the fair work this year. Not to mention, they are also looking at ways to keep their fair around for years to come.

No matter how you slice it, your Wisconsin Fairs want to host their fairs; however, sometimes you just can't get all the ingredients in place to complete the recipe. There is no shame in that. Our members have been working so diligently to find the right recipe for the 2020 fair season, and I support them whole heartedly with whatever decision they make. I wish I could award them all that grand champion ribbon!

Respectfully,



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