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Walworth County Fair

Press Release

Can The Walworth County Fairgrounds Survive?

Elkhorn, WI, March 1, 2016: Unlike many county fairgrounds across the country that are owned and maintained by local or regional government, the Walworth County Fairgrounds is privately owned and maintained.

In Rock County and Jefferson County, tax payers own and fund the maintenance of their fairgrounds. Waukesha County taxpayers own their fairgrounds and they lease it to their fair board. All 3 are public property but Walworth is not.

In Walworth County the fairgrounds are owned and maintained by a nonprofit organization called The Walworth County Agricultural Society. The members elect a board of volunteer directors who manage the operation of the fair and the facilities. For 167 years the Society has maintained the property for the benefit of the community as a whole. Anyone can be a member of the Society by simply buying a season pass to the fair or becoming a lifetime member.

No one in the Society profits from the fairgrounds. Board Members are volunteers and are reimbursed for some, but not all expenses and a small portion of their time, but their total compensation is very small.

The only people that benefit financially from the fairgrounds are our community. While the annual fair is the most famous event, hundreds of other events the rest of the year bring a tremendous amount of economic impact to area businesses and civic organizations. Private promoters such as the Demolition Derby in May or the Car Show in August, the Flea Markets, Dog Show, Tractor Pull, Consignment Clothing Sale and the like all make a profit because of the availability of the fairgrounds. Not to mention food vendors, commercial vendors, carnival companies and more. Everyone benefits financially from the property except the fairgrounds. Ask any restaurant or retailer in the area if their business improves when an event is happening at the fairgrounds.

For 167 years the fairground leadership has figured out a way to keep things going through thick and thin. The current Board is determined to make decisions that will ensure that future generations will be able to enjoy all of the benefits the fairgrounds bring to the community.

Over the years expenses for the Fairgrounds have increased prolifically. Insurance premiums are now over \$120,000, utilities are over \$130,000, famous entertainers that used to charge \$25,000 now charge

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as much as \$7 million. Everyone charges more today than they did 10 years ago while the Fairgrounds maintained below market prices to the public and its vendors.

Because the fairgrounds provide a tremendous service to the community and provides economic opportunities for area businesses, Walworth County funded a 2015 study to help develop a long range strategic plan for the facilities. The study revealed areas of intermediate and long term opportunity but also areas where immediate change is needed.

Consultants stated that no business can sustain continued annual losses and have advised the board that if the fairgrounds are to survive, this trend has to change quickly.

In 2015 the fairgrounds ended the year with its best bottom line in 6 years. In 2014 the property lost over (\$70,000), and in 2015 the fairgrounds lost (\$6,700). Although it is still a loss, 2015 results are a large improvement mainly because of good decisions by leadership.

In 2016, leadership, with the help of the strategic plan has decided to make some adjustments to bring some fees closer to current industry trends. The Board is determined to balance the budget, but is trying to keep the changes in areas that won't hurt the fair going family's pocketbooks.

New sponsors have been added this year along with retaining past partners. Many area businesses will be introduced to target marketing opportunities that not only benefit the fairground but return a quality marketing opportunity for their products. All sponsors will be announced as the annual fair draws nearer. If a business is interested in learning more about how the fair can help market their products as a sponsor they are asked to contact the fair office.

Food vendor and commercial vendor space rent will see significant increases. Even with the increases, vendor space is priced well below other area fairs.

Families will save significant money if they purchase tickets, season passes and carnival wristbands in advance online or in the office. If tickets are purchased on line, families will be able to print the tickets at home.

Adult daily passes will remain at \$10.

Senior daily passes are discounted from regular adult prices to \$8.

Child daily tickets for those 5 years old to 12 will be \$5.

Kids that are under 5 years old will remain free.

Adult season passes will remain at \$25 but only if you buy between June 1st and August 5th. If someone waits until after August 5th, they will cost \$40.

Junior season passes (5 years to 12 years) and junior exhibit passes will be \$15 but if they are purchased in advance and in conjunction with a carnival wrist band they will save \$5.

Discount packages of tickets and wristbands will be available for purchase in advance on line at www.walworthcountyfair.com or in the office starting in April.

A new ticket scanning system is being put in place to improve accountability. Every ticket including workers will be scanned at the gate. There will be QR codes on each ticket that will stop double use or copied versions.

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Lifetime members will receive a new scan card at the information booth near the front gate during the fair.

With the exception of standard reserved seats on the track for concerts, grandstand and side areas on the track will now be \$5 every evening show while the Demolition Derby will remain at \$10. Daytime grandstand shows will remain free. All of the entertainers for the 2016 fair have been hired and official announcements will happen in the coming weeks.

Premium prize money will increase on open class livestock shows; however entry fees will go from \$1 to \$5.

Parking will remain free but there will be some parking spaces closest to the main gate that the public can use if they are willing to pay \$5.

Every year people are curious about whether the fair will have beer for sale. The fair will not have beer for sale anywhere on the property during the fair. This has been the tradition for the fair since its beginning and remains in place for 2016.

Will the Walworth County Fair survive? Yes, because of a determined Board that recognizes that the responsible decisions they make today will ensure that future generations and our entire community will enjoy the benefits of the fairgrounds.