

SAVING AN OLD FRIEND:

THE COLUMBIA COUNTY FAIR

Story/photo: RANDY SANDERS, Columbia County Community Relations Coordinator

In 2011 the American economy was adrift in a turbulent sea of unemployment and recession disaster. Profits were down, funding uncertain.

The Columbia County Fair -- four years away from its century mark -- closed its books \$70,000 in the hole. Its future looked grave. The Board of Commissioners satisfied the debt, then focused their attention towards the difficult

questions looming large over a grim fiscal landscape: can the Columbia County Fair continue? If so at what capacity?

The Board of Commissioners could make things easy on themselves by pulling the plug, walking away and removing the risk of future debt. By doing that, they'd also be removing almost one hundred years of tradition and community. Leadership means making tough calls, so instead they dug deep and made some decisions.

A salaried administrator position was eliminated, along with \$90,000 a year in wages and benefits. This move would provide breathing room needed to survive. The organization went on to break even and eventually show a modest profit. Commissioners Henry Heimuller, Tony Hyde and Earl Fisher had total confidence in a board they hand-selected, beginning with Mike Warren now at the helm. The "administrator" title was dropped. New Board Chair Mike Warren agreed to the same duties, but as a volunteer. These are folks who stepped up and answered the call from their community and its leaders. A tall order when you consider that some are working full-time as volunteers.

This is a great story because it shows how American communities can still be productive despite the vitriol, strife and political divisions dominating so many communities and organizations today. Of course, no community is perfect. But in this case the Columbia County Fair Board got it right. Once chosen, they rolled up their sleeves, buried their egos and got to work. The remaining Fair Board volunteers include:



Position #7/Vice-Chair, Amanda McFeron; Position #6, Julie Stephens; Position #5/Maintenance, Butch Guess; Position #4/Entertainment, DeLoris Bellingham; Position #3/Treasurer, Mary Ann Guess and Position #2/Secretary, Randy Hansen. Other volunteers include: Exhibits, Megan Currie-Bluhm; Rodeo, Mark Sandstrom and Rodeo Court, Chris Cooper,

There's more important things happening at county fairs besides corn dogs, beer gardens or giddy sounds of excitement spilling out from whirling carnival rides, while the penetrating beat of rock and hip-hop music fills the summer air. But make no mistake, these events and games are some of the biggest money makers. Because budget issues continue to plague counties across the United States, coordinators feel the need to eliminate agriculture events – believing somehow that local farmer's markets can step in as a decent substitute – while keeping only the money makers. Fortunately, fair coordinators in Columbia County never lost track of the traditional events that have made county fairs important in the first place.

4H rewards kids with the fruits of their labors. These are kids who work all year just for the chance to show what they've accomplished during fair week. With funding being stripped away from schools and clubs, the role of 4H at the County Fair has become even more important than ever. It's a great educational tool for youngsters to learn responsibility, entrepreneurship and leadership.

I met with State Senator Betsy Johnson May 2, at the Fairgrounds. Columbia County was playing host to the Oregon Fairs Association's Spring Leadership Conference. It's a chance for coordinators from all over Oregon to spend one weekend together each year sharing ideas. I asked her how important county fairs are for rural communities like Columbia County.

“Oh it's not just Columbia County, it's every county where there is a fair. These are key economic drivers. They fill hotel rooms, they fill restaurants. Also it's a chance for kids, and these are the good kids that have worked really, really hard at raising market animals. It's a chance for them to come in and sell them. Get money to go onto college or to buy new market animals. County fairs are huge economic drivers and I think that while some people begin to believe that these are sort of anachronistic throw-backs to a bygone era, they really aren't. These are big deal operations that increasingly need community and volunteer support to stay economically viable and healthy.”

County Commissioners and Fair Board volunteers saved the Columbia County Fair without retreating from the important values. They understand the importance of our rich, agriculture rural past and opportunities of the future. Other fair boards might tap into this successful story by following their lead: sticking with core values and setting aside petty differences that divide them.

For the citizens of Columbia County, losing the Fair would be like losing an old friend. The Fair is a thread that sews the fabric of this community together. It's a big part of what defines us, and what sets us apart from neighboring counties.

“Every budget must be balanced going into the following year,” says Butch Guess, seated next to Mike Warren in a modest wooden building they call the Fair office. He offers me a cup of black coffee -- strong enough to make the teeth of the toughest cowboy chatter – and continues.

“Any business has to support itself or it fails and we’re no different. If we want to keep the Fair, then we are on our own. Our only option was to go volunteer, or lose it.”

Mike Warren became the Board Chair in September, 2011, after retiring from his full-time job. He went right back to work logging in about 150-hours a month at the Fairgrounds.

Butch Guess joined the Board in January of 2014 and has assumed the role of maintaining the grounds and overseeing all improvement projects.

“They handed us the keys and we walked into the office not even knowing how to turn on any of these computers,” Mike admits. “We found a lady who knew all about that computer stuff; she got us rolling.”

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The men brag about the Fair like it’s a grandkid. “So far we’ve paid two-thirds of the loan back to the county and have \$100,000 in the bank,” Mike says with a sense of pride. “Even though we didn’t have to pay the loan back, we always had every intention to do so, and will. We want to have a clean slate not owing anything.”

“One hundred grand might sound like a lot of money, but it goes pretty fast when you’re trying to keep up with all the maintenance issues,” Mike continues. “We’ve already done lots of work on the restrooms, sidewalks and we’ve put in all new stoves and rodeo chutes. The money we have in the bank is nothing but a cushion but we’re glad to have it! We’re very careful how money gets spent around here.”

The largest challenge – aside from the actual rescue of the Fair from its economic doom – was a huge maintenance issue that popped up a couple of weeks before its first year with Board Chair Mike Warren.

“The septic pump went out two-weeks before opening night,” Butch says. “It was bad,” Mike echoes. “To make matters worse, when we dug it out, we noticed that it was held together with nothing but electrical tape! Once I located a new pump, I paid them extra so they’d put a rush on sending it so we’d have it up here in time to install before the first night of the Fair.” Mike’s old office chair chirps as he leans back and takes a deep breath as if he dodged a bullet. He loves putting his time in at the Fair, but welcomes anyone who has the same passion that he does, to step up and volunteer.

“Everyone’s welcome to jump in and help, especially the kids. There’s all kinds of stuff to do around here.” He remarks that volunteers could also get perks, like a Fair pass or enjoy the pizza party at the end of the week.

The perspective a child learns from volunteering with the Fair, is far different than the perspective they get from attending it with their friends. By volunteering, they’ll learn how it feels to run a business and

the importance of teamwork. These are important tools they use whether they wish to own their own company someday, manage, or work at one. By volunteering with the same people who turned the Fair around, they'll feel the same sense of accomplishment and pride. When the mantle gets passed on to them in the future, they'll be better prepared to accept the responsibility.

"We're trying to appeal to the younger folks as well. After all, we ain't gonna live forever," Mike laughs. "We're also trying to get the entertainment that these young kids like," Butch chimes in. "It's pretty clear they don't care much for all that old country stuff or Elvis impersonators." Both men laugh. "We're always looking for new, exciting music and stuff they'd like to see and hear. You know, oh... like, Jason Aldean for instance," he says grinning. "Some of that old stuff puts me to sleep too!" Butch adds while waving his hand in the air as if swatting a fly.

As I get up to leave, both men rise to see me out. Mike tucks his shirt into his jeans with a careless hand, then adjusts his old ball cap. The wooden boards of the office creak underneath us like an old leather saddle. We shake hands and say our goodbyes.

I walk outside into a sunny, warm April afternoon. On the way to my car, I pass by rows of time-worn buildings that have served many years of events in the past. Poking my head inside one of them, I see shafts of sunlight passing through the space between the wood panels. The sunlight exposes all the fine details of the weathered, old wood. The image seems appropriate and poetic. Bathed in the light of past traditions, the Columbia County Fair seems ripe for a very sunny future.