

Attendance down, yet fair ends in black

By Alexa Zoellner Union staff writer | Posted: Friday, August 7, 2015 8:51 am

JEFFERSON — Attendance for last month's Jefferson County Fair was lower than the previous year, yet revenues still were in the black.

The Jefferson County Fair Park Committee met on Thursday for the first time since the fair to discuss why attendance was down, possible future changes and fair revenue.

Committee members include Chairperson Blane Poulson, Vice Chairperson Matthew Foelker, Al Counsell, Russell Kutz and Jennifer Hanneman, who was absent. Also in attendance was County Administrator Ben Wehmeier, Fair Park director David Diestler, and marketing and administrative assistants Amy Listle and Leslie Pelikan.

The 2015 fair's total attendance was 42,727 people, compared to 43,522 in 2014 and 47,572 in 2013.

"We were down 795 fairgoers from last year," Diestler said. "Most of them were Friday night — we were down 784 people from the previous year. I think Chris Cagle canceling on us, that's what hurt us. The biggest increase we had was Wednesday with Kids' Day, when we were up 697 fairgoers."

Poulson voiced concerns about comparing the 2015 numbers with those of 2014.

"It's not fair to go up against last year's numbers," Poulson said. "We had a rain day last year and this year we didn't."

Diestler suggested looking at the averages for past years.

From 2010-14, the average total number of fair attendees was 44,306. The total number of 2015 fair-goers was 1,579 less than the average over the last five years.

The average Wednesday attendance for 2010-14 was 8,772. This year's 9,470 attendees were 698 more than the average. Thursday's attendance of 8,802 was 529 more than the five-year average of 8,273.

Friday's average attendance was 9,871; this year 8,501 attended, down by 1,370. On Saturday, the 9,930 attendees were 1,330 fewer than the five-year average of 11,260. The Sunday average was 6,348; attendance for this year was 6,024, a drop of 324 people.

"We're down considerably," Poulson said. "I think, as a committee, we've got to figure out why. We've got to figure out where the disconnect is and what happened."



IN ALL FAIRNESS

IN ALL FAIRNESS — The Fair Park Committee met Thursday for the first time since the Jefferson County Fair last month. Members discussed how fair attendance was down, with 42,727 attending throughout the week, but the event still made a profit of \$4,687.58. — Daily Union photo by Alexa Zoellner.

Diestler said that possible competition for attendance could come from Summerfest and the Wisconsin State Fair.

“The Jefferson County Fair is competing against those people’s dollars,” Diestler said. “People may not use the money that weekend, but they’re going to Summerfest at the end of June so they don’t have money to go to our fair.”

One way to compete with larger events would be to bring in bigger name acts, he noted.

“Several agents that I talked to (said) the move to grow is to be able to bring in bigger acts,” Diestler said. “But you need the money to do that.”

Poulson expressed concerns about the cost for bigger acts possibly outweighing the profit generated.

“A lot of faith goes into the variety of attractions,” Poulson said. “I think we can’t overreach. We’re not Alpine Valley.”

Counsell said another way to look at the situation is, “what is the objective of the county fair?”

“If you want to run with the big dogs, you can’t run like a puppy,” he said. “I think there’s an argument for, if you want to grow attendance and separate yourself from the other counties, roll the dice and go after some of these top-name acts.”

Committee members agreed that any changes, such as more popular headliners, would depend on revenues versus expenditures.

For the 2015 fair week, Fair Park revenues totaled \$84,051.68 and included, among other things, contest entry fees, sponsor revenue, gate receipts, charges for food and beverage vendor space, camping fees and reserved seating fees.

Expenditures added up to \$79,364.10 and included costs related to fair judges, Fairest of the Fair, ribbons, tickets and entry tags, advertising, grounds improvements and other operating expenses.

Overall, the fair made profit of \$4,687.58.

“We’re still collecting money from fair week,” Diestler said. “We’d really need another month-and-a-half to find out the true picture of it.”

In other business, the committee:

- Discussed 4-H exhibitor attendance numbers, other revenues and smaller potential changes.

“For 4-H exhibitors overall, we were up from the previous year,” Diestler said. “Obviously the online entry didn’t affect us at all.”

The number of Junior Class exhibitors was up 11 at 849; Open Class was up one with 118; and Senior Class was up three with 17.

Carnival revenue increased \$5,000 from last year, but beer sales were down.

A consideration for the Miller Lite Tent is the addition of a dance floor. Dancing took place during the Junior

Amateur Talent Competition and La Movida, which, according to Diestler, had the tent “packed.”

“A lot of people were dancing and we don’t really have a dance floor there,” Diestler said. “We put down a plywood floor, but the ground isn’t even there, so do we maybe put a concrete pad there for the people dancing?”

- Addressed concerns expressed by a citizen who lives near the Fair Park regarding the brightness of the fairgrounds lighting. He expressed wishes for the lighting to either be shaded or redirected.

Counsell expressed the opinion that it would be impractical for the fair park to shade the lights.

Diestler said that, when he observed the light beams at night, the beams never left the fair park property.

“We want to come to some resolution on this,” Poulson said. “But we’re not guaranteeing that we can.”

- Heard communications in the form of thank-you letters and an email from Tracy Jahnke of Jefferson regarding concerns with the new online registration. Jahnke also suggested adding a late fee for entrants who missed the deadlines.

“I think the biggest thing is communication with people that want to enter into the fair,” Listle said. “I think we did everything we normally did in the past by putting (the online registration information and deadlines) in the 4-H newsletter and sending out emails about it. So maybe we could find some more creative ways for better communication.”

Committee members discussed the possibility of a late fee. They said it was something to look into, but problems that could arise is lack of space and the inability to plan in advance.

- Discussed the issue of being short-staffed going into fall. They are looking for one 1,000-hour worker and another weekend worker.

- Talked about possible changes in winter storage groupings and costs. No action was taken.