



MARION COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
WORK SESSION

Marion County Fair Annual Review
Minutes

Thursday, March 26, 2026, 1:30 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.
Commissioners' Boardroom
Courthouse Square, 555 Court St. NE, Suite 5231
Salem, Oregon 97301

ATTENDANCE:

Commissioner's: Colm Willis, Commissioner Bethell and Kevin Cameron

Board's Office: Trevor Lane, Alvin Klausen, Chris Eppley, Toni Whitler, and Gary White.

Legal Counsel: Jennifer Rogers.

Community and Economic Development : Chip Bury, Denise Clark, Brian Smith, Kellie Weese, and Eric Mason.

Marion County Fair Board: Jeff Simons, Greg Martin, and Shannon Gubbels.

Fair Event Coordinator: Scott Ingalls, and Jill Ingalls.

Commissioner Colm Willis called the meeting to order at 9:35 a.m.

1. Welcome & Introductions

-Commissioner Colm Willis

2. Overview of the 2025 Fair

-All

- Annual review of Marion County Fair:
 - Centered on the "3 Fs": Fun, Finances, Future.
 - 4-H and Future Farmers of America (FFA) youth centered core mission of fair.
- Youth, education, and community impact:
 - Approximately \$1.2 million in receipts from youth livestock and project sales:
 - Benefiting 4-H/FFA participants and local businesses.
 - Fair is extension of classroom for FFA and year-long project platform for 4-H:
 - Public speaking, leadership, record books, finance tracking, and resume building.
 - Participation starts in kindergarten through high school.
 - Approximately 684 exhibitors and over 3,000 projects, ranging from:
 - Small animals:
 - Guinea pigs, rabbits, etc.
 - Larger livestock:
 - Pigs, goats, sheep, steers, etc.
 - Static exhibits:
 - Table settings, quilts, photography, pies, etc.
 - 334 volunteers and 82 vendors helped with operations and community engagement.
- Attendance and promotions:

- Overall fair attendance was 25,000 to 26,000:
 - Similar to or slightly above pre-COVID levels.
- Introduction of free Thursday promotion:
 - Typical Thursday attendance is 1,500–2,000.
 - 2025 Thursday attendance was about 8,500.
 - Met goal of greatly increasing Thursday traffic and vendor exposure.
 - Friday to Sunday attendance and spending was weaker, partly to:
 - Extremely hot weather, over 100°F:
 - Shifted arrivals into cooler evening hours.
 - Reduced full day spending:
 - Lost lunch periods and fewer day carnival rides.
 - Attendance up, but gate and some vendor revenues down overall.
- Financial performance
 - Net loss for 2025 Fair:
 - Approximately \$158,000.
 - Largest loss in 10-year review window.
 - Total 2025 revenue:
 - Approximately \$392,000.
 - Down 28% from about \$545,000 in 2024.
 - Key revenue changes:
 - Subsidies and grants:
 - 2024 included about \$94,000 in grants:
 - State fair and Oregon Business Development grants.
 - Funds did not recur in 2025 and created a significant gap.
 - Operating revenue down roughly 18%.
 - Gate receipts:
 - In 2024 about \$87,000.
 - In 2025 about \$50,000:
 - 42% decline, despite 22% fewer paying customers:
 - Once the free day attendees are excluded.
 - Food booth fees and carnival revenues decreased:
 - Food vendor revenue across all days went down about \$7,000.
 - Expenses:
 - Overall increased by 9%, exceeding historical ~2% annual growth.
 - Major drivers:
 - Higher county administration charges, Materials and Services:
 - Website rebuild.
 - Historically, operating revenue less than operating expenses:
 - Positive net years have relied on grants and subsidies.
 - Without subsidies the fair typically runs an operating deficit.
- Competition and market conditions:
 - 4th of July event at Oregon State Fairgrounds has become direct competitor:
 - Carnival and big-name entertainment.
 - Occurs days before Marion County Fair at same venue.
 - Marion County Fair revenues:
 - Earlier years, 2022–2023, about \$48k–\$53k.
 - First year of 4th of July event, 2024, dropped to about \$29k.
 - 2025 remained roughly flat in high \$20k range.
 - Hot weather further depressed daytime fair and food sales.
- Public competitions:
 - Public competition entries such as quilts, pies, art, etc. increased:
 - Participants up from 248 to 385.
 - Number of entries also increased.

- Youth receive premium payments funded by Marion County Fair Foundation:
 - Adults receive ribbons only.
- 2020 virtual fair not fully reflected in historical charts and needs to be added.

3. Use of the State Fairgrounds

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- Current rental framework
 - Fair operates at Oregon State Fairgrounds under long standing agreement.
 - Historical arrangement included:
 - \$45,000 a year rental value, not paid as cash check in recent years.
 - County prepaid via in kind work by county crews and equipment:
 - Paving, etc.
 - In 2022 county last incurred major costs under arrangement:
 - 2023–2025, no direct rental checks issued.
 - Aside from reimbursing specific operational costs like fuel.
- Historical deed and legal context
 - County conveyed land to State Fair entity for nominal amount, \$1:
 - Under conditions that the grounds continue to be available for fair use.
 - The deed is from the 19th century, partially handwritten:
 - Understood to condition gift on ongoing fair access.
 - Arguably at no or minimal cost.
 - Legal counsel completed preliminary deed analysis in late 2025:
 - Developing options based on this.
- Proposed rent increase and fee structure
 - State Fairgrounds signaled intent raising annual rent to \$120,000 by 2028:
 - Represents large jump from effective \$45,000 baseline.
 - Does not include tables, chairs, animal panels, or other furnishings:
 - Rented separately, item by item.
 - Operational fee changes:
 - Staff labor by fairgrounds personnel billed at about \$95/hour:
 - Historically much of this support was informal and not billed.
 - June 2024 restricted camping after camping had already been sold:
 - Forced alternative campground and hiring host, raising costs.
 - Fair board members and staff report:
 - Reduced cooperation and flexibility compared to past years.
 - Perform significant safety and maintenance work themselves:
 - Tree trimming.
 - Fixing ruts in show rings.
 - Addressing tall grass.
 - Addressing hidden potholes in parking.
 - Resolving plumbing and drainage issues.
 - Parking fees aren't showing improvements in lot or management.
- Relationship and governance dynamics:
 - Fair's situation different from private or commercial users:
 - Inter-governmental relationship.
 - Historic land gift and community mission.
 - Management appear to be applying uniform pricing model to all users:
 - Sends standard rent increase letters to all renters.
 - Little recognition of county fair's unique status.
 - Other large event users unhappy with rising costs, rules, and parking issues:
 - Interested in other venues but largely have nowhere else to go.
 - Talk of forming a user group to push back.

- User hesitant to speak out due to concern about retaliation or access loss.
- Marion County representatives attempts to present to State Fair Council were:
 - Limited to public comment rather than agenda item.
 - Met with minimal engagement and no follow up.
- Competitive timing and facilities:
 - 4th of July event seen as deliberate competitive move by State Fair leadership.
 - Scheduling options for Marion County Fair are constrained by:
 - 4-H and FFA animal and project cycles:
 - Breeding and weight timelines.
 - State fair qualification timelines.
 - Slaughterhouse and processor schedules:
 - Tightly sequenced across fairs statewide.
 - Vendor, carnival, and service provider routes are fixed long in advance:
 - Tents, toilets, security, etc.
 - Neighboring fairs and buyer schedules that avoid overlapping dates.
 - Moving fair earlier or later by a few weeks possible but practically difficult:
 - Could have cascading negative impacts.

4. Next Steps

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- Financial and ticketing analysis
 - Develop a detailed revenue scenario analysis that includes:
 - Gate receipts and paying customer counts by day.
 - Comparison of:
 - Status quo (free Thursday).
 - Proposed \$3 Thursday for all attendees.
 - Keep free entry for first responders, military, and their families.
 - Other alternatives:
 - Half price Thursday.
 - No Thursday fair.
 - Online/advanced purchase incentives.
 - Two-day passes with bundled Thursday discounts.
 - Modeled impacts on:
 - Gate revenue.
 - Food and beverage commissions.
 - Carnival revenue and vendor satisfaction.
 - Reconcile why 22% decline in customers is a 42% decline in gate revenue:
 - Determine if pricing mix, discounting, or other factors contributed.
- Legal and policy strategy regarding the fairgrounds:
 - Complete and formalize a legal memo outlining:
 - Deed's conditions and legal leverage associated with historic land gift.
 - History of in-kind contributions in lieu of rent.
 - Legal options of response to rent increase to and new fee structures.
 - Negotiation strategy with State Fair Council and management:
 - Including potential legislative avenues.
 - Prepare formal response to State Fairgrounds' rent increase letter:
 - Document fair's unique status:
 - Public mission, deed history, inter-governmental partnership.
 - Highlight mutual benefits county fair provides to State Fair:
 - Grounds preparation, shared audiences.
 - Seek revised, sustainable rental framework that recognizes the factors.
 - Coordinate with state legislators and Governor's appointments process to:

- Ensure State Fair Council understand county's position and community impact.
 - Explore legislative options to protect fair access and affordability.
- Engagement with other users and stakeholders:
 - Encourage other large users to share concerns directly, as comfortable, with:
 - Marion County leadership.
 - State Fair Council.
 - Relevant state bodies.
 - Consider supporting formation of user group or coalition to jointly address:
 - Pricing, parking management, and safety issues.
 - Long-term sustainability of events at State Fairgrounds.
- Youth and community engagement:
 - Follow up on interest in leadership opportunities for 4-H/FFA youth:
 - Coordinate logistics for student visits or shadow days at the county.
 - Continue to support and grow:
 - Public competitions and youth premiums:
 - Including updating historic data to reflect 2020 virtual fair.
 - Volunteer recruitment and recognition.
- Marketing, data, and evaluation:
 - Implement an intercept survey at upcoming fair to collect:
 - Visitor demographics and place of origin by zip code.
 - Visitor satisfaction and preferences:
 - Likes and what needs improvement.
 - Information on ticket purchase behavior:
 - Advance versus gate purchase.
 - Multi-day attendance.
 - Investigate geo fencing / mobile location data services to:
 - Where do attendees come from and how they move on and off site.
 - Improve marketing targeting and message placement.
 - Evaluate and refine ticketing strategies:
 - Analyze performance of online pre sales, season passes, and bundles.
 - Monitor Thursday price change impacts on attendance and revenue.
- Long term sustainability planning:
 - Monitor reserve levels and project the impact of:
 - Future rent scenarios including the proposed increase.
 - Expected trends in expenses.
 - Potential continuation or loss of various grant sources.
 - Use planning to:
 - Inform ongoing negotiations with State Fairgrounds.
 - Guide decisions about fair size, scope, and programming to maintain a sustainable operation focused on youth and community benefit.

Adjourned – time: 10:44 a.m.

Minutes by: Mary Vityukova

Reviewed by: Gary L. White