

Residents weigh in on fairgrounds

Citizens don't want county to sell fairgrounds

By MIKE SACCONI
The Daily Sentinel

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Local residents told Mesa County planners and commissioners Tuesday evening they want to see the Mesa County Fairgrounds maintained for 4-H programs and other community uses.

Lisa Pfalzgraff, a program leader with Grand Valley 4-H, said she does not want to see the construction of a proposed indoor events center lead to the county's selling off the fairgrounds.

"This is a big hurdle for us," she said. "We're concerned."

Pfalzgraff was one of more than 200 local residents who jammed into the fairgrounds' community center to hear local leaders discuss future uses for the nearly 100-acre fairgrounds along U.S. Highway 50 on Orchard Mesa.

Reed Mitchell, a developer for the downtown civic arena, also told the crowd about how his proposed 141,000 square-foot, 5,000-seat facility could host rodeos and other events

"A building like this is a rite of passage to go from being a town to a small city," Mitchell said.

Local residents said they liked the idea of Mitchell's arena, which the county and city of Grand Junction are studying, but do not want to see it completely replace the fairgrounds.

Karen Eslinger, who participates in Colorado State University's master gardener program at the fairgrounds, said she has "mixed feelings" about the new events center.

Eslinger said even though it will be a major improvement for the county, the region's 4-H programs and other agricultural programs for youth need the fairgrounds as a place they can use.

Harlen Gibson, who lives near the fairgrounds, said he hopes the county will preserve part of the fairgrounds to honor the region's veterans.

"This is a veterans memorial park," Gibson announced during the meeting.

The fairgrounds, established in 1944, were first called the Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park. It was renamed the Mesa County Fairgrounds in March 2001.

Tom Fisher, director of the Mesa County Regional Transportation Planning Office, assured the crowd, however, that the county is not planning on shutting down any part of the fairgrounds yet.

"We're indicating that we're looking at this possibility," Fisher said. "No decisions have been made."

He said for at least the next two years, while the county, city and private sector work out a plan on the area, the fairgrounds will continue on, business as usual.

Mesa County Commissioner Janet Rowland said even if the county and city move ahead with the arena, the fairgrounds will continue to serve local residents in many of the ways it already does.

County Commissioner Steve Acquafresca also told meeting attendees the fairgrounds has to continue to serve the public because not every event will fit well with a 5,000-seat coliseum.

He said the county wants to see a “net growth” in the number of places events can take place.

“We’re going to be looking at how the fairgrounds serves its traditional users,” Acquafresca said.

Anyone interested in commenting on how the fairgrounds should be used in the future can e-mail the county at fairgrounds@mesacounty.us.

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E-mail Mike Saccone at msaccone@gjds.com.

“Developer Reed Mitchell makes it look easy and maybe it is for him. The City Council and staff would be well served to investigate what occurred to Casper, Wyo., financially with its events arena. The taxpayers got the bill for that one too.”

My response is: I am from Casper, Wyo. and never had a problem with what little of our property taxes went to our events center. The reward of having big name entertainment all year long, far outweighs a small property-tax increase.

With this type of events center that ultimately belongs to the community, people should step up in support. Take Denver for instance with their two events centers, both Invesco Field and The Pepsi Center. These are both owned by both investors and the community. You see the majority of the population not only in support of the events centers, but in support of the teams that play there. I do think that everyone in Grand Junction should look at the Casper Events Center and see what they are missing.

Does the words PBR Only, James Taylor, Elton John, Evanescence, Metallica, Tool, Bon Jovi, Alison Krauss or the Eagles mean anything to anyone here? These are a few of the Events that graced Casper recently and the list goes on and on!

DEAN MESTAS
Grand Junction

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February 19, 2008

The [best news of the day](#) is that a private developer, who is in negotiations to lease the old Jarvis property west of Fifth Street, is talking about hosting the County Fair and other events there.

This is a good thing. It's a great use of the property, and a great home for events that have negatively impacted residents of the current Fairgrounds neighborhood.

None of us in the neighborhood will ever complain about the County Fair. It was here before we were. However, in an effort to pay the Fairgrounds bills for the other 51 weeks of the year, the County has made neighbors' lives a living hell. Unlike the Fair, those impacts are newer than our properties.

It's been difficult to watch (or listen to) the government give itself a free pass on 100 dB events on its own property while at the same time holding a private landowner north of I-70 to 65 dB.

The Jarvis property has no immediate neighbors. It's a great place for noisy events. It's also not good for much else, given its proximity to the smelly asphalt plant.

Talk about a win-win situation. I'll do anything I can do to help this happen.

A fair deal? More than half of
fairgrounds property could be sold

By Emily Anderson
Free Press Staff Writer
March 26, 2008

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GRAND JUNCTION — As much as two-thirds of the Mesa County Fairgrounds could be sold to pay for improvements to the Jarvis property west of Fifth Street above the Colorado River.

The property is not for sale now, but areas like the horse barns and the dirt arena may go. The arboretum, parks, Little League diamonds and BMX area would stay.

The Jarvis site may be home to a new civic arena a couple years from now if Grand Junction developer Reed Mitchell can get the project off the ground with private funding and a federal loan. The city of Grand Junction and Mesa County have signed letters of intent to conduct a feasibility study on the arena's potential.

The county won't help pay for the arena, said Mesa County Administrator Jon Peacock, but it may build some exhibition space or an equestrian center on the property. To make way for those things to be built, up to 60 acres of fairground may be sold, he said.

"Here's an opportunity to take existing assets and maybe use it for something else," Peacock said at a meeting Tuesday night to inform citizens interested in the fairgrounds about possible next steps there.

The county will decide whether or not to support the civic arena when the results of the feasibility study come out in July. A public-private partnership would allow for two more seasons at the fairgrounds before events may move to the Jarvis site.

If the partnership doesn't happen, improvements will not be made to the current fairgrounds, at least for now. A 2007 business plan for the fairgrounds calls for \$10 million in upgrades to make the fairgrounds "competitive and marketable." Inadequate money is coming in to pay for those upgrades, said Tom Fisher, regional transportation planning director for the county.

Mitchell said the civic arena will pull in big indoor acts and incorporate some events held outdoors now at the fairgrounds.

"A building like this is a rite of passage for a large town to become a small city," Mitchell said. "Grand Junction is ready for that rite of passage."

Reach Emily Anderson at eanderson@gjfreepress.com.

Programs in trouble

Nancy and Ed Groenert
Grand Junction
March 21, 2008

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The 4-H program, master gardener program, arboretum and Little League fields are in jeopardy.

The plan for sale and commercial development of the fairgrounds and surrounding county property could result in a great loss of valuable public services to our community. The land and buildings near the fairgrounds are home to the 4-H program, the master gardener program, the Arboretum, the Orchard Mesa Little League and the BMX park.

The master gardener program alone assisted 8,044 clients and diagnosed 2,574 samples brought into the office in 2007. The gardeners volunteered 7,392 hours of service that year, which, at a volunteer hourly (nontechnical rate of \$18.77/hour) was worth \$138,748.00 to the county in 2007. The future of the Arboretum and research and demonstration gardens, which were built and are maintained by donations, grants and volunteers at no cost to the county, is also in question if this land is commercially developed.

All the programs that call the fairgrounds home need access to the land and classroom buildings for demonstrations meetings and workshops. Space is also needed for plant and tree sales and the seedling tree program. These programs benefit our community and are all open to county residents. The proposed sale and development of the fairgrounds needs to include provisions for the continuation of the low cost services that we now enjoy! What is being planned to preserve them? It is impossible to put a price on some things we enjoy, and these programs should not be sacrificed for gleam of dollar signs in the eyes of the commercial developers!

There is an informational meeting to discuss this issue on Tuesday, March 25, from 5–6:30 p.m. in the Community Building of the Mesa County Fairgrounds.

As master gardeners, we are very concerned about the loss of services to the community if these fairground facilities are reduced or eliminated!

Grand Junction man wants to build a civic center

And he says he can do it without new tax dollars

By Emily Anderson
Free Press Staff Writer
February 20, 2008

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GRAND JUNCTION — Local real estate agent and developer Reed Mitchell hopes to court everyone from singers to sports players to perform at a possible new civic arena in Grand Junction.

“There are world-class entertainment productions that drive on I-70 between Denver and Salt Lake City each week and they stop, buy gas, wave and move on,” Mitchell said.

Mitchell wants to end that trend and build a venue for concerts, rodeos, tractor pulls, horse shows and maybe even a minor league hockey or arena football team. He is eyeing the 66-acre Jarvis property west of the botanical gardens as a site for the potential civic arena, and may look at getting a long-term lease from the city of Grand Junction to build on the property.

The civic arena’s estimated price tag is \$35.6 million. Mitchell said there are still a lot of questions to be answered about the project, but he plans to ask the United States Department of Agriculture to provide all but \$10.6 million of that amount through a business and industry loan guarantee tailored to rural communities. Mitchell, who is president of Award Realty, has a similar loan for a mobile home/RV park that he owns.

The rest of the money would be split between private investors and other sources.

The 141,000-square-foot arena would seat up to 8,000 people (5,000 of those would be permanent seats) and contain two restaurants, meeting rooms and 20 skyboxes. Construction would take an estimated 18 to 24 months, and the civic arena could open as soon as May 2010, Mitchell said.

The Grand Junction Chamber of Commerce conducted a feasibility study to see what people thought of constructing a civic arena in Grand Junction a few years ago. Mitchell recalled the results were positive. He believes the civic arena would get an even better reception now that the community has grown. He also feels a public-private partnership is the best way to accomplish what local entities have not.

Mitchell said there won’t be any new bond issues or tax increases to fund this.

“Most event centers or civic arenas are designed and constructed by government,” he said. “But I think private enterprise can do a much better job.”

Mesa County Commissioners praised the project after a presentation by Mitchell Tuesday afternoon. The commissioners and County Administrator Jon Peacock agreed to send out a letter of intent as early as this morning to support at least a feasibility study for the civic arena. The feasibility study would likely be conducted by county staff and/or Mitchell’s team. Mitchell’s partners on the arena project include lawyers Dennis Baker and Kirk Rider, architect Frank Wagner, CPA Dennis Morris and Bighorn Consulting Engineers

Inc.

County Commissioner Steve Acquafresca said the arena idea came at the right time — just after the county completed a business plan study and identified capital investment needs for the county fairgrounds. Some of the events at the fairgrounds could move to the arena, although Mitchell is unsure how many or which ones.

Acquafresca said with a significant amount of snowpack melting this spring, it's also perfect timing to look at flooding possibilities on the site, which is next to the Colorado River. Baker said the arena group would examine floodplain data on the site before firming up plans.

The arena project would also have to look at maintaining a buffer between the arena and a nearby neighborhood, Peacock said.

Mitchell will present his concept at an exclusive announcement reception from 4 to 6 p.m. today at Two Rivers Convention Center and will present the arena idea to city officials at a Grand Junction City Council meeting at 7 p.m. tonight. The city signed a letter of intent in support of the arena in December.

Reach Emily Anderson at eanderson@gjfreepress.com.

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