

County fair funds in short supply

By HOLLY SPANGLER

MARVIN Perzee is passionate about county fairs.

As a volunteer at the Iroquois County Fair for 42 years, he's been there long enough to watch generations of 4-H kids learn a thing or two at the fair, grow up, move on and become responsible citizens within their rural communities. He's seen the good fairs can do for rural areas and the way they promote agriculture. And he thinks those fairs are worth saving.

As the state's budget deficit looms larger, he fears county fairs may end up on the short end of the financial stick.

History of fair funding

Perzee, who also works with the Illinois Association of Agricultural Fairs, points out that county fairs have been receiving state aid since 1870.

Key Points

- 2008 fairs got less than half the promised reimbursement.
- New funding source may help in 2009, but is no guarantee.
- Leaders say many fairs won't survive at current funding.

In 1927, the General Assembly approved pari-mutuel wagering at racetracks, establishing the Agricultural Premium Fund. By 1985, further gambling outlets such as the lottery, off-track betting and casinos caused a decrease in the revenue fund.

In 1999, then-governor George Ryan cut a deal with track owners, reverting all funding back to them. County fairs lost their designated funding source; but, instead, a law was passed guaranteeing a reimbursement of 66½ cents for every dollar county fairs paid in premiums.

Rod Blagojevich exacerbated

the problem, as he siphoned off that appropriated funding for county fairs. By 2008, Illinois county fairs were receiving less than 30 cents on the dollar for the premiums they paid out — far short of what Illinois law says they should receive.

Day late, dollar short

Last year, even that less-than-promised reimbursement came late. Bill Fugate, secretary of the Illinois Association of Agricultural Fairs, reports that many counties didn't receive reimbursement until December.

With a state budget deficit looming, the likelihood of reinstating full county fair funding appears grim.

Rep. Dan Reitz, D-Sparta, introduced H.B. 543 earlier this spring. The bill would restore funding to county fairs and might even increase the reimbursement rate. However, at press time, the bill was moving through the system, but all meaningful language had been struck, according to Illinois Farm Bureau lobbyist Bart Bittner.

The bill has floated for the past three or four years, and Bittner doesn't give it high odds of passing this year. Yet clearly, there's already a law on the books directing reimbursement to county fairs, and until money is appropriated in the budget, another law won't change anything.

The new bill is a good-faith effort. Says Bittner, "It's important for our legislators to push

these issues that are important to agriculture. Fairs keep rural communities going."

Bittner says the Illinois Farm Bureau is supportive of county fairs, but is backing a position of financial conservatism.

"Our board's approach is to be fiscally responsible and be part of the solution. It's hard to ask for things like county fair money when we don't have a funding source. It's county fairs vs. Extension, and it's Extension vs. Soil and Water. Everybody needs funding, but it's just not out there," Bittner explains.

Charlyn Fargo, head of the Illinois Department of Agriculture's Division of County Fairs and Horse Racing, concurs. "The problem is, there's just not enough money. This is such a year of unknowns."

What next?

The financial uncertainty leaves many county fairs in limbo for the 2009 season. Fugate explains that the state requires premium listings be completed before the new budget is completed and goes into effect.

"Fairs are locked into guaranteeing an unknown quantity," he says. "Some fairs are writing disclaimers in their fair book that premiums may change, but I'm not sure about the legality of that."

Certainly, some fairs are in a better financial position than others, and various solutions have been floated among fairs operating closer to red than black. Lower premiums or

By the numbers: 2008 county fairs

104	Number of Illinois county fairs
375,199	Number of entries shown
2,870,853	Number of people who attended, statewide
29,842	4-H members who participated in county fairs
4,494	Number of fairground acres renovated
\$7,816,945	Premiums paid to exhibitors
\$2,103,507	Premiums reimbursed by state of Illinois

paying fewer places seem the most likely, Fugate reports.

He doesn't believe livestock shows will be cut completely because to satisfy state requirements, premiums have to be spread out over a large number of departments.

"It's hard to get dollars split up if you don't have a livestock show," he explains.

Regardless, Fugate and his county fair cohorts are worried about the near future. "We have a deep concern about funding from the state of Illinois for county fairs," he says. "There will be some fairs that, if they don't get their fair share, will have a tremendous struggle to carry on."

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PRICELESS: "A dollar amount cannot be established for the amount of good accomplished by county fairs," says Ashkum farmer Marvin Perzee. "County fairs showcase the efforts of youth, promote agriculture and the annual event is the yearly highlight of every community."