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Little Rock's Plan Sways Board, State Fair to Stay Put

By Mark Carter - 6/14/2012 10:56:38 AM

As expected, the board that oversees the Arkansas State Fair voted Thursday morning to keep the fair at its present location off Roosevelt Road in south Little Rock.

The vote was unanimous and swayed by the city of Little Rock's plan to help with expansion and renovation, including a pledge of \$300,000 per year for the next 10 years taken from the recent sales tax increase.

(Video: Ralph Shoptaw Talks To Reporters About Thursday's Decision To Keep The Arkansas State Fair In Little Rock.)

North Little Rock and Jacksonville had submitted bids to move the state fairgrounds to parcels north of the river. Ralph Shoptaw, general manager of the Arkansas Livestock Association, which runs the fair, admitted that until Little Rock's last-hour pledge, Jacksonville seemed poised to win the fair with a site it offered off Interstate 440.

But Little Rock's commitment to help expand the fairgrounds, plus its \$3 million pledge, turned the tide. Shoptaw said the Arkansas fair operates on less than a third of the space of the average state fair. The board leases 146 acres from the state, of which it can use about 96. Even if the board had chosen to relocate, the new site wouldn't have hosted a fair for "eight or 10 years," he said.

Little Rock promised to help acquire about 51 acres east of the current site and work to merge two sets of railroad tracks north of Wright Avenue, which would free up roughly 34 acres just west of the fairgrounds for expansion.

In addition, the owner of a vacant industrial site west of the fairgrounds has indicated an interest in making the property available to the fair, which would add another 47 acres. The state highway department has plans to replace the Roosevelt bridge over the railroad and has committed to building a large pedestrian walkway over the tracks.

The city has also pledged to help secure a south entrance into the fairgrounds off I-30. The land leased by the fair from the state extends to Interstate Park, off Arch Street, from which interstate access could be constructed.

The city also committed to:

- Develop a plan to improve the streetscape along all main routes into the fairgrounds;
- Work with the board to secure available historic preservation grants;
- Condemn and demolish dilapidated housing around the site;
- Develop fair sponsorships and building naming rights through its Advertising & Promotion Commission.

All told, plans entail an addition of about 100 acres to the fairgrounds. Shoptaw said changes would take about 10 years to implement in full.

Board member Bruce Maloch of Magnolia said he would have preferred to "start new somewhere else," but the commitment from Little Rock was too sweet to pass up.

The work on the Roosevelt bridge is expected to begin as soon as the 2012 fair concludes in October.

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