
From: carolynbeaver1@gmail.com
Sent: Monday, October 16, 2023 3:02 PM
To: 'Chair:'; 'Vice Chair:'; 'Dimetria Jackson:'; 'Tanya Bilezikjian:'; 'Barbara Bagneris:'; 'Douglas La Belle:'; 'Natalie Rubalcava-Garcia:'; 'Robert Ruiz: '
Cc: Michele Richards; OCF Executive; 'Gibran Stout'; Leigh-Ann Kazolas; 'Lisa Sabo'; 'Theresa Sears'
Subject: Letter to OCFEC Board of Directors

I have also sent the letter below by mail, but in the interest of time am sending the text of the letter via email as well.

Dear Director:

At the September meeting of the 32nd District Board, the Board voted to put the operation of the Equestrian Center (EqC) out to bid, and expressed the intention to close the EqC if it could not be operated at least at break-even.

First, I would like to remind the Board that in October and November 2022, many equestrians voiced our objection to the proposed contract with Lopez Works Inc., which we knew would generate significant losses for the operation of the EqC. Nonetheless, management recommended, and the Board approved, a contract expected to generate losses exceeding \$100K per month. Now, several months later, the Board is questioning the losses and considering alternatives, and has proposed to go out for bid for another operator and consider closing the EqC if the Board is unable to find an operator who can bring the operation to at least break even by March 2024. A member of the public suggested that the losses could be deemed as a “gift of public funds”, however, the increased cost of operation of the EqC is not a gift of public funds for the benefit of users of the EqC. The increased cost was not the choice of the users, it was the choice of management and the Board, and benefited the contractor they chose, not the users. Therefore, it is clearly not a gift of public funds.

Second, management has never engaged a consultant with experience in equine facilities to provide an estimate of the cost to 1) extend the life of the existing facilities through any recommended major repairs or 2) to replace the existing facilities in a cost-effective manner. At one of the “listening sessions” CEO Michele Richards recently told a group of equestrians that the \$20 million estimate was ridiculous and would not be used for discussions. Just like I continue to drive my car which is fully depreciated, the existing barns still have usefulness. Let’s find a way to ensure that we continue to utilize the barns safely.

Third, and more importantly, I would like to remind the Board about the benefits of the EqC to the public. In 2018 when we had discussions about the future of the EqC, many members of the public including equestrians spoke to the Board. I am sure that those who were directors in 2018 remember when Addison, an 11-year-old equestrian, delivered an impassioned plea to continue the EqC, at not one but two Board meetings. The poise that young girl had in describing the benefits of her training with horses was so impressive that then Chair Bagneris stated “Addison, you’re going to have to go into public speaking”. Addison still rides and benefits greatly from her experience with horses. Meg, who spoke as a junior rider, is now competing on a national scale in eventing as a young rider, after her early schooling with the Newport Mesa Pony Club. Remember that many others also came and discussed the benefits from horses and the positive impact on their lives. In that May 2018 Board meeting, Director LaBelle made a motion “That

we quit horsing around and we make it very clear that the Equestrian Center is going to remain as a part of the Orange County Fair & Event Center. And that a three-member study committee -- well, Director Aitken and Director Tkaczyk, along with a third member of the Board, be appointed by the Chair to have a collaborative effort in terms of meeting with the equestrian users and bring back specific recommendations at some future date to the full Board.” When and why did you stop having a three-member committee?

Hundreds of people come to ride at the EqC each year, and many more come to visit to enjoy seeing horses. Members of the public can watch horses being ridden and observe horses in their stalls or turnouts. People can easily arrange to have lessons which are provided by many of the trainers on their “school horses” at a reasonable cost, which makes riding horses accessible to the public at large, in addition to the members of the public who own and board horses at the EqC. In fact, I started riding at the EqC 11 years ago by simply taking lessons once a week, which reignited my passion for horses. People of all ages benefit from horses.

During COVID, we had very restricted ability to ride, and the public was not able to come for lessons for months. Since those protocols have been removed, there has been a significant increase in people wanting to take riding lessons and be outdoors. Horses have been proven to aid in mental health for many people. We need to expand access to horses to more people to improve the mental health of our community. The EqC plays an important role in providing that access.

The Strategic Plan for the OCFEC for 2022-24, states that OC Fair & Event Center’s equestrian center will serve as a true public asset to ensure greater access to a broader group of constituents throughout Orange County. It will be operated as a “best in breed” equine venue with the highest standard of care for boarded horses and animals in need of shelter during emergencies. What progress has been made to complete the implementation steps outlined in that strategic plan?

The equestrians recently operated a small horse show and our volunteers will be operating our annual Halloween parade, in addition to the programs we offer through the non-profit Changing Strides and volunteer tours. Some of the equestrians have presented the staff various ideas for public programming, but none of those ideas have yet been acted upon. It is curious to me that we have not yet seen any programs organized by the OC Fair staff since they took over management of the EqC at the beginning of the year. Why is that?

If you decide to close the EqC:

- Where will children in central Orange County have access to horses and be able to ride?
- Where will adults who would like to ride be able to access horses and lessons in central OC?
- How will children and adults learn about horses and the role that they have played in agriculture?
- How will children and adults learn about and participate in equestrian sports? These sports have been so important to developing young women and young men who have gone on to succeed in life, and in some cases, equestrian sports specifically. There are few equestrian facilities left in Orange County.
- How will the mental health benefits of connecting with horses be available to the community through the accessibility of horse boarding and horse riding programs in Orange County?

As you think about the next steps for the Equestrian Center, please consider the best ways to fulfill the mission of the 32nd District AA: *Creating equitable community access to agriculture,*

entertainment, cultural and educational experiences.

What will your legacy be as Board members? The ones who voted to shut it down without fully assessing the investment required to maintain the facility, or the ones who voted to build for future generations, like those who are on the wall of the EqC office?

The Board needs to ensure that the RFP process seeks operators with equine experience and commercially reasonable terms. The process should not be rushed as it was when Lopez Works was hired; if necessary, the staff may retain Lopez Works or could hire employees on a temporary basis and manage the EqC until they find a qualified contractor.

We equestrians look forward to engaging in all-inclusive discussions with the Board, with staff and interested members of the public about all current issues and future planning regarding the Equestrian Center. One thing is clear – we all have the same goal and mission: to ensure that the Equestrian Center flourishes as a vital, thriving, community-focused treasure of Orange County. We need to find ways to ensure that this jewel remains to benefit our community.

Sincerely,
Carolyn Beaver
Equestrian, CPA (inactive) and independent board director