

F.A.R.M. Aims To Pay Off Schuylkill Fairgrounds Mortgage

By VAL VANTASSEL
Berks Co. Correspondent
SUMMIT STATION (Schuylkill Co.) — The Schuylkill County Fair is a little dream that has grown beyond all expectations. What started as a 4-H Fair on the parking lot of Penn State Schuylkill Campus has grown into a week-long event on the 70-acre fairgrounds in Summit Station.

The transformation from a little event on borrowed premises to a major attraction with year-long potential has taken place in just six years. Like a teen-ager sprouting in all directions the Schuylkill Fair is having a few growing pains. They can be summed up in just one word . . . money.

"In 1984 we opened the fair up. By the next year we realized that we had outgrown the space available and we started looking for a new place to hold the fair. It took us a year and a half, but eventually we had a chance to buy the Happy Holiday Park," explained Tim Allison, a member of the Schuylkill Co. Fair Association.

The 70-acre park came complete with a hefty \$200,000 price tag and few facilities, but it did have a feature not easily found in Schuylkill County. "The park is level. It was basically a swimming and picnicking spot with a few miscellaneous camp sites. There was a building that we use for the fair office and shower facilities," Allison explained.

Money from preceding fairs had been used for fair improvements and so there was no money available for purchasing the fairgrounds.

That's when F.A.R.M., the Foundation for Agriculture and Resource Management, was formed. "Nine banks agreed to loan us a total of \$190,000 and a fair association member loaned us another \$10,000. F.A.R.M. owns the property and the fair association runs the fair. There are 11 members on the F.A.R.M. board, with six being members of the Schuylkill Fair Association," Allison said. Allison is one of the association's representatives on the F.A.R.M. board.

That means F.A.R.M. gets to pay the mortgage. Payments on the 10-year loan run approximately \$43,000 a year. Raising that kind of money would be a daunting task for many organizations but the one thing that the fair association and F.A.R.M. aren't short on is enthusiasm.

"We waited to run a major fund raising campaign until we received our 501 C status from the IRS. For the first year the Schuylkill Fair Association carried F.A.R.M.," Allison said. The new status makes contributions tax deductible.

"Now it's time for F.A.R.M. to support itself," Craig Morgan, F.A.R.M. member added.

F.A.R.M. started their campaign in July. They announced that they hoped to raise \$250,000 in three years to pay off the mortgage. "Then we can put our monies toward the fair and other activities," Allison said.

F.A.R.M. is asking businesses and individuals for pledges. This includes the approximately 460 members of the Schuylkill Fair Association. "We're asking them to pledge \$100 each of the three years. We've been running a telephone campaign and it has been moderately successful. To date we've raised approximately \$16,000," Allison said.

Recently the group has been

extending their efforts. "I met with the Schuylkill Carbon Farm Association and they volunteered to include a letter from F.A.R.M. to their 700 members. They also are willing to help us find farmers to visit agribusinesses for contributions," Morgan said.

"We need more people, not only to contribute money, but to help run the campaign," Allison added.

FALL FESTIVAL DATES SET

F.A.R.M. in conjunction with the fair association has some other creative avenues for raising funds. "We will be holding our Fall Festival Oct. 14 and 15 at the fairgrounds. It features a Belgian horse trolley, a haunted house, a greased pig contest,

petting zoo, fishing rodeo and lots of games. A number of craft people demonstrate their arts. Last year we had caning, painting woodworking, quilting, apple butter making, and sausage making," Allison explained.

The group has sold raffle tickets and they hold an auction in the spring.

The most popular event by far is the fair. It's come a long way and the group is proud of its achievements. "The fourth year of the fair we had a Class C rating. Last year we became a Class A fair. We've gone from 5,000 people in attendance to 40,000 people this year," Allison said.

"We even ran out of parking Wednesday and Thursday night," Craig Morgan added.

It isn't big name entertainment that draws big crowds to the fairgrounds. "Ours is basically a family oriented agricultural fair. We just have a lot of family type activities for people to participate in," Allison said.

Among the creative ideas the fair has employed are big wheel races for youngsters, a youth talent show, hay bale tosses and rolling pin tosses, senior and junior Olympics, a volleyball tournament and a tractor driving contest.

That was really popular. We had about 40 participants in different divisions. There were 300 to 400 people watching the contest before we were finished," Morgan said.

"One request we had was for more daytime activities and we will be

working on it for next year."

The agricultural exhibits are also a big draw. Over 150 dairy cattle, 160 goats, and 130 breeding sheep were shown at the fair. "Until the fair came along there was no 4-H market sale. This year we had 25 swine, 32 market lambs and 6 beef sold at the fair," Morgan explained.

"The fair has made people aware of the agriculture that is in this country. When most people think of Schuylkill County they think of mining. Agriculture is valuable in this county and ag-business is our number one business," added Allen Borger, F.A.R.M. member.

Part of the secret to the fair's success is its eager membership. "We

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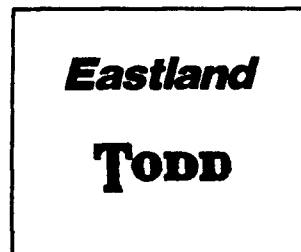
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