

Short-handed, long-serving fair board unlikely to gain new members, history suggests



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This screenshot shows the January meeting of the Ventura County Fairgrounds board, including board members, staff and audience members. *SCREENSHOT PHOTO*

The volunteers who serve on the Ventura County Fairgrounds board of directors hold their seats until they resign, are replaced or die.

Jim Salzer, rock concert promoter and longtime Ventura music store owner, was appointed to the fair board in 2011 and served until he died three years ago at the age of 78. The seat remains vacant.

Bonnie Weigel, appointed as a director by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2010, announced her resignation during a closed-door board meeting in Nov. 2021. That position also remains empty.

Armando Lopez, a 77-year-old Oxnard developer appointed 19 years ago, stepped down in November, citing his health. His departure means a nine-member board that governs the state's 31st District Agricultural Association, encompassing the 62-acre fairgrounds in Ventura, is down to six. It does not appear likely to grow higher.

“I have been given no indication that we can expect any directors anytime soon,” said Fairgrounds CEO Stacy Rianda, adding she’s been told by the state that new appointments from Gov. Gavin Newsom are unlikely unless the board can’t make quorum and can no longer vote. “We’re at six (members) and the quorum is five. For the time being, we’re fine.”

The vacancies and the lack of replacements spark more debate about a board that has been thrust into the spotlight by controversies over on-site gun shows, an unsolved \$518,000 burglary and the rejection of a proposed \$319 million facelift of the beachside fairgrounds.

Some contend the empty seats are a secondary issue. Others urge Newsom to make new appointments.

“I think it’s a broken process because the governor doesn’t pay much attention to fair board appointments,” said farmer Craig Underwood, a former fair board director who now serves on a fairgrounds foundation that focuses on fundraising. “If a board is nine people, it ought to have nine members. The governor should show a little more interest.”



In this pre-pandemic photo from 2018, M. Cecilia Cuevas and other members of the Ventura County Fairgrounds board debate gun shows. *JUAN CARLO/THE STAR*

Leah Lacayo, 80, of Newbury Park, has served 18 years on the board in two separate stints and is in at least her second go-round as board president. She said it would be nice to have a full complement of directors but also noted the short-handed board is still able to deal with fairgrounds business in its virtual meetings including a planned vote on a proposed \$4.1 million budget for 2023.

“I don’t think it’s a dire need,” she said of filling the vacancies. “We’ve been managing.”

Directors are not paid. Perks are few outside a free parking spot during the fair. People interested in the job file applications on [a state website](#). Several members said their interest was spurred by passion for the fair.

The event brings 12 days when the entire county comes together, said former director Armando Lopez.

“There’s incredible participation. It’s not an event you go to and sit and observe. You participate. Every age, every economic level, every ethnic group is participating,” he said. “When you look what it takes to put it together, it’s an incredible endeavor. It’s amazing.”

Last appointment made in 2015

Lopez said his health left him no options but to step down. He withheld comment on the need for the governor to fill the vacancies.

“Do six members do as good a job as nine members?” he said. “That’s the question for someone else to answer.”

Directors are supposed to serve four-year terms. Re-appointment can be determined by whether the board member's political affiliation matches the governor's.

There have been no appointments or reappointments since Newsom took office in 2019.

The last addition to the board came eight years ago when Gov. Jerry Brown appointed Shanté Morgan-Carter, former journalist and now faculty member at CSU Channel Islands. She became the first African American on the board and was reappointed in January 2017 along with Director Leslie Cornejo, marking the last official reappointments.

Developers granted second shot to pitch baseball stadium at Ventura County Fairgrounds

Now terms for all current board directors have expired. They will stay on the board unless Newsom replaces them.

“If you’re not removed, you continue to serve at the pleasure of the governor,” said M. Cecilia Cuevas, a financial advisor appointed to the board 12 years ago. “I have no control of it. It would be nice if we had a full board.”

The vacant seats are not unique to Ventura County. Fair boards across the state are short of directors. Rianda said she has been told positions are usually filled only if a board loses more than half of its members, meaning it can no longer take action.

Quorum is not always the trigger.

The nine-member San Bernardino County Fair Board has been out of quorum on and off for two years and currently has four members. Because of the vacancies, board members now also serve on a delegated authority committee they created and empowered to vote on fairgrounds business.

“It’s the only way for us to function,” said Fair CEO Jennifer Morgan, asserting that such situations are becoming common. “I know I’m not the only fair running this way.”

An online state listing of board vacancies is littered with fair boards that need directors but also appears out of date. No vacancies are listed for the Ventura County Fairgrounds board.

A governor’s spokesperson didn’t explain why more vacancies are not filled but said in an email that Newsom made 26 fair board appointments across the state last year and one so far this year. The official said board members are no longer reappointed because California’s government code allows them to continue to serve in expired terms until replacements are made.

“There isn’t a time frame to share regarding these appointments,” the official said.

Fair board directors and other observers said the lack of appointments show other boards across the state are in more dire straits and reflects the governor's long list of priorities.



After two years of COVID-19 cancelations, the Ventura County Fair returned in August. *ISAIAH MURTAUGH/THE STAR*

“We’re near the bottom of the list of important positions that the governor has to appoint,” said Cornejo, appointed in 2013. “He has judgeships. He has university commissions and boards. The fair boards tend to be near the last ones.”

Cornejo said the board can still function effectively with empty seats.

“I don’t think it matters as long as you have a quorum and you have people who are thoughtful,” she said.

It has been a tumultuous time for the board. The COVID-19 pandemic forced the fair to be canceled for two years, sending the budget plunging into the red. Finances have improved with the fairgrounds showing an about \$1.9 million profit for 2022 as of November.

The board also wrestled over the controversial gun shows that had been held at the fairgrounds for many years, opting to allow the events to continue despite pleas from county and state lawmakers for a ban. [State legislators relieved the pressure by passing prohibitions on gun shows on the property.](#) The law took effect in January.

The 12-day fair returned in August and brought a 40% jump in revenue compared to 2019. But an early morning break-in on Aug. 10 resulted in the theft of \$518,000 from the fairgrounds administration building, raising questions about security and internal communications with some directors saying they didn't learn about the crime for months.

The latest controversy involves a team of private developers who are proposing a \$319 million facelift of the fairgrounds that would include building a 7,500-seat stadium to be used for minor league baseball, conventions and concerts. Directors rejected the proposal in October after a 16-minute presentation. Developers complained the idea wasn't [given a fair shake and cited a \\$25,000 contract](#) they signed with then fairgrounds CEO Barbara Quaid guaranteeing exclusive rights to make a detailed presentation.

Directors agreed to allow the team to make a second presentation in a two-hour public hearing set for Feb. 22.

Falling off radar screen

The board hired Rianda in June to succeed Quaid, who retired. Officials also announced the Strawberry Festival, long held in Oxnard and canceled for three years because of COVID, will be held at the fairgrounds in May in a major coup. Rianda said more announcements of high-profile events are expected soon.

The biggest need is to come up with a long-term plan to repair or replace the dilapidated buildings that dot the site, said Mike Bradbury, the former Ventura County district attorney who has served on the board for 18 years.

“We need to upgrade the fairgrounds. That has to be our No. 1 goal,” said Bradbury, 80, of Ojai. He asserted new members could bring fresh ideas and energy.

“I think it’s very healthy for the board. I think what we’ve gone through the last few years is not. I think it tends to diminish the organization when you have a third of its members vacant,” he said. “I would like to see some new blood badly.”

Rianda praised the experience of the current board and said she didn't see drawbacks to its short-handed nature.

"They know this place," she said. "They have this institutional knowledge. It's very helpful for a new CEO."

State Assemblyman Steve Bennett, D-Ventura, said lack of action by the governor's office can mean a board falls under the radar and doesn't get the public scrutiny that is warranted.

"You can end up sometimes with boards that aren't as representative of your community as they should be," he said.

Bennett said part of the problem is a governor's priority list that is too long. He also said the public knows little about the operations of small boards that run fairgrounds or water systems or sewage systems partly because there's less news media than there once was.

"It's a sign our democracy isn't as engaged as you would like it to be," he said.

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Editor's note: *This story was updated to correct the amount developers paid for the exclusive right to make a presentation.*

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