

Reports point to possible safety hazards at Ventura County Fair grandstands; repairs planned



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Ventura County Fairground grandstands fast-tracked for repair

Gallery: Aging grandstands at the Ventura County Fairgrounds have been fast-tracked for repair of corrosion and wear, as seen Friday, April 7, 2023.



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Driven by two reports citing possible safety hazards, Ventura County Fairgrounds officials said they are fast-tracking repairs to 1960s-built grandstands in an arena that hosts car races, rodeos and concerts.

The assessment facility reports, released in late March, point to corrosion, wear and bent bracing in the two steel grandstands framing the [Ventura Raceway](#) that features sprint car, motorcycle and other motorsports races on Saturday nights. Owned by the fairgrounds, the stands are also used for other events including a five-day Skull & Roses tribute festival that could bring 6,500 Grateful Dead fans to the fairgrounds, starting April 19.

Stacy Rianda, CEO of the beachside fairgrounds in Ventura, said inspectors have deemed the grandstands safe for events but also said she and other leaders will discuss repair plans this week in a meeting with the raceway's owner, a structural engineer who inspected the site in January and representatives of the California Construction Authority.

“As soon as possible,” California Construction Authority Executive Officer Randy Crabtree said of when work is expected to begin. “That is the exact timetable we are on with the fair right now.”

The authority is a public agency that provides construction management, inspections and code compliance review to fairgrounds across the state. In December, the authority conducted a "non-intrusive" facility assessment requested by fairgrounds board directors who worried about mounting maintenance needs that grew worse with recent rains.

The assessment triggered [a 51-page report that detailed repair and renovation needs](#), including the roof at a building that houses off-track betting, walls for at least two Quonset huts and electrical connections in outdoor areas and barns.

The stars of the report were the two grandstands. Authors said corrosion, aluminum metal fatigue and dry rot have taken their toll and called for a more detailed assessment by a structural engineer.

“A significant amount of corroded, worn and aged components and connections has rendered the grandstands hazardous and unsafe condition for public usage,” the report says.

Related: [Fairgrounds board delivers final 'no' on stadium proposal](#)

The follow-up structural inspection on Jan. 17 by Dagley Engineering of San Diego called for replacing damaged and missing bolts, tightening or replacing rods that serve as cross braces, removing corrosion from beams, installing new steel plates and replacing deteriorated wood seats that have been covered with plywood.

“It is highly recommended that the repairs as described above be implemented as soon as possible as they may pose a threat to the life safety of the occupants,” engineer Devan Dagley wrote.

Crabtree said the engineer told him the grandstands were structurally equipped for continued use but needed repairs. Dagley did not return messages and asserted, according to Crabtree, “the report speaks for itself.”

Some of the damage cited in the reports is minor and much of it is commonplace for grandstands, especially those located near saltwater, Crabtree said.

“All of them develop issues that necessitate repairs,” he said, then referring to the fairgrounds. “The good news is they’re working to get all of those things addressed.”

Fairground and raceway leaders said they are prioritizing the repairs and that they should be completed before the August fair. They also noted that events in the grandstands arena will continue and that inspectors have not imposed safety restrictions.

“If there was threat to life and safety, they would have been closed,” Rianda said. “We would not be able to utilize them, and that’s not the case.”

A local institution

The Ventura Raceway has operated since 1978, holding sprint car, midget car, motorcycle and other racing events. Billed as the “best little dirt track in America,” its races attracted ESPN coverage in a “Saturday Night Thunder” series in the 1990s and have featured some of the nation's most prominent racers, including NASCAR's Chase Elliott and Kyle Larson.

In February, the raceway's many supporters helped pack a public hearing on a private \$319 million proposal to build a baseball stadium at the fairgrounds and renovate the entire fairgrounds in a pitch driven by the site's many maintenance needs.

Board directors rejected the proposal, which would have eliminated the raceway, in March after also voting against the concept five months earlier.

It's unclear how much work will be done in the planned repairs on the fairgrounds but it will be significant, said Jim Naylor, the raceway owner who built much of it. There will be new seats and enough changes that the arena will likely look different, he said.

“It's a lot of things that haven't been done are going to get done,” he said. “It's overdue for an overhaul.”

The cost of the repairs will be shared by the fairgrounds and the raceway. Details of the split have not been finalized, Rianda said.

“We'll have to see what it costs,” she said.

The fair's finances were weakened by a pandemic that brought the cancellation of fairs in 2020 and 2021 but bounced back and showed a profit last year of about \$1.8 million. Financial records through February in a period that often produces little revenue shows a net loss of about \$177,000.

Rianda said the fair's budget for the year includes a healthy reserve fund that could help with the maintenance needs detailed in the 51-page facility assessment by the California Construction Authority.

Naylor, a fixture at the fairgrounds, praised Rianda's efforts in spearheading changes, clean-up and maintenance repairs at the site. He said the biggest attraction of the fairgrounds – the beachside locale – is also its biggest detriment.

“The worst thing is the Pacific Ocean,” he said, referring to the saltwater. “It eats everything up.”

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