

**OPINION** *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

# Guest editorial: Proposal for Ventura County Fairgrounds was more than fair

**Phil Foster Ranger** Your Turn

Published 12:00 p.m. PT April 15, 2023



My name is Phil Foster Ranger and I am the great grandson of E.P. and Orpha Foster, the pioneering couple who established our county park system, built the Avenue School, the Foster Library and City Hall — and in 1909 gifted Seaside Public Park to the county of Ventura for community pleasure, recreation, and entertainment “in perpetuity.”

Let me be clear: While not affiliated with Pacific Sports Group (PSG), I do have a relationship as the remaining Foster descendants support the plan proposed by this local team 100%. This is my perspective on how we can foster and expand upon E.P. and Orpha’s vision and legacy.

Imagine a fully renovated fairgrounds with LEED Silver Certified buildings, all new native landscaping, a stormwater management plan that alleviates flooding and provides safer waters for surfers and beachgoers, a multipurpose stadium for sports and entertainment, year-round access to an oceanfront campus that hosts more than just a 12-day fair with picnic areas, restrooms, ocean-front dining, beach-goer shops, and amenities for families and visitors alike. Camarillo built the outlet malls, Oxnard brought us The Collection. Ventura has a similar opportunity by transforming the county fairgrounds into a destination that serves more than just a small segment of the community.

PSG, a thoughtful group of homegrown architects, engineers, contractors and trade organizations, was invited to engage in the process to develop a framework that addressed infrastructure needs dating back to 1996. While some folks continue to short circuit revisioning the fairgrounds, my concern is that our place for community has become a Roman ruin, which can easily be attributed to decades of deferring repairs that have escalated beyond regular maintenance.

For instance, “immediate needs” are highlighted in the 31st District Agricultural Association (31st DAA) Ventura County Fairgrounds Physical Assessment, which can be found in the director’s March 28 board packet.

This 51-page report, prepared by the California Construction Authority (CCA), scratches the surface of “readily visible deferred maintenance” as the CCA made a “visual, non-intrusive, non-destructive evaluation” and states that their report “is not a building code, safety, regulatory or environmental compliance inspection.” And in the end, there was no inspection of the sub-surface infrastructure. As a concerned surfer, I can only imagine what’s in today’s run-off from that facility.

Despite fair board leadership twice rejecting PSG’s proposal by suggesting the plan is “too big” or fearing they “may lose control,” the reality I see is directors unable and/or unwilling to perform their responsibility to the mission of the 31st DAA due to fiscal constraints and their inability to generate annual revenues capable of maintaining, much less improving the property. As concerned citizens, it has fallen upon the community to step in and help realize the revitalization of what was once a crown jewel for this region.

PSG is a coalition — all from the 805 — that has the means, the team, and the vision to renew what best fits the needs of our community. Their conversations with members of the fair board began in November 2021. Action followed with a compelling and well-researched business model that took a stranded public asset and transformed it into a net-zero energy campus for everyone to enjoy, most especially fairgoers, their families and friends.

For all Venturans, the fairgrounds will become a safer, more user-friendly facility that will mitigate traffic congestion during the fair and large festivals, and reinforce the facility against climate impacts for decades to come. Above all, focus on the 31st DAA’s mission to “promote, support, educate, celebrate and preserve the diverse culture and traditions of our county and to make certain that the Ventura County Fairgrounds be an exemplary multi-use community resource” will finally become a reality.

The organized effort to take the Foster family’s vision from the grave and into the future — and turn it into a fight for or against — distracts from our community’s needs and PSG’s purpose. Thoughtful renewal of our “Country Fair with Ocean Air, “ once understood, should be a positive community effort supported by the governing directors of our fairgrounds. Understanding and appreciating the value of PSG’s efforts and how we, as a community, may come together to leverage our facility to best support agriculture and the annual Fair is the value we can create together.

Efforts by the board (and management) to derail a reasonable initiative put forth by this community coalition will continue a no-improvement stance that is not sustainable. PSG’s environmentally sound plan ensures our annual fair will not just survive, but actually thrive as an important community feature well into the 22nd century.

So rather than ignore this opportunity that has been nearly two years in the making, my family and I urge you to learn more about this proposal, provide positive feedback to the directors, have them explain their arguments for or against, and above all, please continue to support the process so as to allow this coalition of local planners to move forward with a comprehensive proposal that, in the end, will benefit us all.

