

## Play ball?

Fairgrounds redevelopment proposal could “bring baseball back to Ventura County”

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Robert Young isn't giving up on his dream of transforming the Ventura County Fairgrounds by tearing down most of the aging infrastructure and constructing new buildings including a minor league baseball stadium, convention space and ocean-view restaurants.

A team led by the Los Angeles lawyer and former owner of four minor league baseball teams has already spent about \$1 million on ambitious plans to redevelop the state-owned facility overseen by a board of directors appointed by California's governor.

Pacific Sports Group (PSG) paid fairgrounds officials \$25,000 to enter into exclusive negotiations on redevelopment plans last January, which led to an Oct. 25 meeting where the fair board shot down the ambitious proposal on a unanimous vote.

PSG officials were given 15 minutes — during a meeting conducted remotely over Zoom — to discuss their complex, \$319 million proposal. Following the meeting, Young told the Ventura County Reporter that he's seeking another chance to present the plan to the fair board and community members in an in-person setting instead of a virtual meeting.

“I was not a very happy camper,” said Young, PSG president, about the virtual meeting and limited time allowed to his development team. “I remain confident that the board will revisit this and give this its just due, and even eventually approve it, because it's their future. They really have to do something.”

Fair Board President Leah Lacayo told the Ventura County Reporter that the fair board gave ample consideration to the proposal and she sees no need for a rehearing.

“I think we fulfilled our part of the agreement and they should be satisfied,” Lacayo said. “This looked like something you might put in the middle of Hollywood or Burbank. I just don't see it in Ventura. They see the property, and of course it's beachfront. And, you know, they go gaga over it.”

But board member Michael Bradbury told the Ventura County Reporter that he feels the PSG development team deserves another chance at bat. “My opinion is, they have not received a fair hearing and they should. I think that it's important at some point in the new year that they be given an opportunity to make a full presentation to the fair board and to the public.”

Bradbury added that although he voted against moving ahead with the proposal, he still believes there needs to be careful planning for future upkeep and renewal. “The fairgrounds is in pretty rough shape and it requires a systematic approach to improving and replacing facilities there so it remains viable and safe and attractive to the public.”

### Fairgrounds history and a vision for the future

A 25-page presentation summarizing the proposal prepared by PSG outlines some history of the fairgrounds along with the company's vision for the property. The “handout for community education/participation” available on the PSG website describes how one of Ventura's founding fathers, Eugene P. (E.P.) Foster, and his wife, Orpha, donated the land that eventually became known as Seaside Park. In addition to the annual fair, the property had a long history of hosting baseball teams. Babe Ruth Field operated for decades starting in 1947, according to company officials, and featured teams called the Ventura Yankees, Ventura Braves and Ventura Oilers.

Development team member and local historian Jeff Maulhardt is also a member of a pioneer farming family in Ventura County. Maulhardt told the fair board that the proposed 7,500-seat baseball stadium, that could also be used for concerts and other events, would harken back to earlier times.

“What I like about this project is that it does honor baseball and its history and also the Foster family who donated the property, and we follow the vision of a public park and a place for recreation. We have amenities that support the fair. We bring baseball back to Ventura County,” Maulhardt said.

Other aspects of the proposal include building two parking structures and new administrative buildings. The grandstand would be torn down and replaced with a rodeo arena and new stables. A transit center for trains and buses is envisioned as well as a Ventura Police substation.

The fair would continue to be held each summer even during the construction that would be built in phases over six years, PSG officials said. Young told the board that the proposal will require partnership and teamwork between his company, fair leaders and other community partners.

“Our proposal is to modernize, revitalize and reinvent this wonderful community asset. And it will require this board's visionary leadership, the permitting of many and numerous adaptations, along with significant capital. We seek to combine this public facility with private investment and leverage the strengths and community benefits of what the fair has been and what it can be,” Young said.



Rendering of Ventura County Fairgrounds redevelopment proposal including minor league baseball stadium. Image courtesy Pacific Sports Group

### Concerns over condition of fairgrounds

Following the proposal by the company, fair board member Dan Long explained why he was against moving forward with it.

“I have questions about the risk involved, whether this would actually pay off for the baseball part. Maybe it would,” said Long. “I have more concerns than positive things that I've seen from this, so I'm just going to be upfront about it. Like, I see this becoming more of a sports complex than an ag resource. And I think, like a lot of developments, too much is crammed into the 63 acres. I would like to at least take a shot at fixing things before we sell out to some big corporation.”

Board member Armando Lopez raised concerns about such a radical change to the fairgrounds. “I'm not clear what the impact is going to be on the ability of the community to use the facility the way it's been used up to now,” Lopez said. “The fairgrounds belong to the community — not to me, not to the board, and not even to the state.”

Bradbury said regardless of what happens with the proposal, the fairgrounds needs help. “Regrettably, our fairgrounds are falling apart. We have not had the money or the ability to put back into the fairgrounds to keep it up to date. And it's in pathetic condition. I'm not saying this is the right proposal, but we've got to start looking at a way to repair and maintain our fairgrounds.”

After it became clear a majority of the board was against moving ahead with the proposal, the panel did decide to seek a facility assessment from state officials on the current buildings and what work they need.

### Not ready to concede defeat

Even though the fair board voted against moving ahead with the proposal, Young told the Ventura County Reporter that he's still hoping for another chance to make a longer presentation to the fair board and the community.

“In every contract in California is implied a covenant of good faith and fair dealing,” Young explained. “The way our agreement reads is that they were to take this under submission and respond with comments, and things did not happen as was anticipated. And so I have every confidence as a lawyer, with many years' experience, that we will have another opportunity to present this now that the public knows.”

Bradbury, who is also Ventura County's former District Attorney, agreed that PSG might have a legal case to support a more robust hearing.

“They paid for it. They deserve it. They haven't received it. They're entitled to it,” he said. “I think if they wanted to pursue it they could probably get a court order requiring it. I mean, there was an agreement and we have not carried through with our part of that agreement, pure and simple.”

The Ventura County Reporter asked Young why redeveloping the fairgrounds is such an attractive opportunity that it was worth spending about a million dollars on the plan, and even continuing the quest even after facing an apparent defeat by the fair board.

“Location, location, location,” Young said. “You have 63 magical acres waiting to be developed in a way that will make that fairgrounds an event center as we contemplate, along with downtown, into a whole new focal point for Southern California. We don't want people driving by on the 101 on their way to Santa Barbara and Los Angeles. We want people to stop and come to Ventura.”