

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE OHIO EXPO CENTER AND STATE FAIR

February 2022

Submitted by:



I. Situational Overview

A. Background

The Ohio Expo Center (Expo Center) is an event venue north of downtown Columbus that occupies 360 acres. It is home to the Ohio State Fair (State Fair) as well as more than 200 other events throughout the year. The Ohio Highway Patrol Training Academy and the former Mapfre Stadium are also located on the Expo Center grounds. The Expo Center campus includes 20 buildings, parking for 12,000, and more than 1 million square feet of event space under roof.

In July 2019, Gov. Mike DeWine established the Ohio Expo 2050 Task Force (Expo 2050), charged with reviewing the Expo Center and State Fair experience and developing and recommending a Strategic Vision Plan that will enhance the use and enjoyment of the property in the future. Expo 2050 has comprehensively examined the Expo Center - touring the property and buildings, attending various events and engaging with stakeholders - to establish context for the Plan. After some delay caused by the pandemic, the Expo 2050 is resuming efforts to complete the Plan.

“Ohio agriculture is the biggest industry supporter of the Expo Center and State Fair.”

B. Agriculture Industry and the State of Ohio

As one of the largest and most important economic sectors in Ohio, the agriculture industry enjoys a positive working relationship with the State of Ohio. Since their inception, the Expo Center and State Fair have been firmly rooted in Ohio agriculture. The fair, which was started by the ag industry, is the state’s signature event which attracts diverse audiences and showcases all that Ohio has to offer. It features research and innovation from Ohio colleges and universities, agriculture advancements and technology and provides the opportunities for citizens to connect with the public sector via state agency exhibitions. The fair generates tourism and economic benefits for the state. It also offers robust opportunities to develop Ohio youth and the future workforce through its dedication to agriculture education.

Ohio agriculture is the one of the biggest industry supporters of the State Fair. The industry also contributes to the success of the Expo Center via non-fair related activities. For example, the Ohio FFA is located on the fairgrounds. Agricultural groups host many major events at the Expo Center such as the Ohio Beef Expo, Ohio National Poultry Show, Quarter House Congress, Spring Dairy Expo, youth events, Home and Garden Shows and others.

C. Purpose: Share Critical Recommendations

We fully support the development and implementation of a long-term vision for the Expo Center site. We applaud the governor for spearheading the effort. The agriculture industry passionately wants to be a part of the effort to modernize the Expo Center and State Fair while building on its rich tradition to best serve the interests of taxpayers and consumers in Ohio. To ensure that the input, ideas and concerns of the agriculture industry, including preserving the current location and footprint with a strong investment for improvements, are properly incorporated into the state's new Vision Plan, the Ohio agricultural groups named in this document have developed the following recommendations for consideration by Gov. Mike DeWine, the Expo 2050 Task Force, the Ohio Expo and State Fair Commission, the State of Ohio, and other public sector leaders and influencers.

The recommendations outlined herein are not new. We have repeatedly voiced concerns related to location, facilities, safety and funding for the Expo Center and State Fair. Most recently on November 3, 2021, this group submitted a letter of concern with capital funding requests to Governor DeWine. As industry partners, we remain committed to working with the state to ensure the sustainability and success of the Expo Center and State Fair. We respectfully request that Gov. DeWine, the Task Force, the Commission, and other public sector leaders respond to these recommendations with action and the urgency and seriousness warranted.

II. Recommendations

The participating Ohio agriculture group leaders adhered to a diligent and collaborative approach to create the following recommendations.

A. The Big Picture

1. Mission

We strongly recommend that the Ohio Expo Center and State Fair's mission continue to honor and celebrate its agrarian heritage. Creating awareness about the vast opportunities for Ohio's consumers and celebrating the food and agriculture sectors are essential elements of the mission.

2. Vision with supplemental short-term solutions

We support the state's effort to create a dynamic, long-term vision and plan for the Ohio Expo Center and State Fair. However, we recommend developing a short-term plan for immediate implementation to resolve urgent issues.

B. Land Use and Optimization

1. Location and site

We adamantly recommend preserving the historical presence of the Ohio State Fair in Columbus and maintaining its easily accessible location. At its current location, the fair entertains, engages and educates consumers about food, agriculture and the state. Moving the venue would be detrimental

to the mission and to the financial viability of the State Fair. It is well documented that the most dynamic and successful state fairs are located in highly populated, urban areas.

We also strongly object to repurposing or reducing the size of the fairgrounds in any manner. While the facilities and grounds require reinvestment and upgrades (like all physical sites), the venue has the capability to be an amazing site and asset to the state, taxpayers and consumers. It has the potential to be a nationally recognized showcase for Ohio food and agriculture and to support great events including the Ohio State Fair.

2. Facilities and infrastructure

We recommend upgrading the facilities at the Expo Center and State Fair that will allow for maximum earned revenue opportunities. This includes modernizing infrastructure and improving the use of technology. We suggest enhancing and creating new facilities while retaining the heritage and charm of the fairgrounds.

Our specific and urgent recommendations are as follows (not in order of priority):

- **New facility to replace the Ohio Building** - The round “Taste of Ohio Café” building has outlived its usefulness as a showcase for Ohio foods. Agriculture commodity groups have been serving customers in a building that was not designed for food service. A new structure will accommodate increased crowds who want to taste what the state’s agriculture has to offer and will provide opportunities to feature additional agricultural food offerings.
- **Replace Donahey Agriculture & Horticulture Building** - The Ag & Hort Building, during the fair known as *Land and Living* sponsored by Nationwide, serves as the fair’s flagship agriculture consumer education exhibit. Ohio agriculture groups, Ohio State University College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and Nationwide have partnered on this exhibit for more than 20 years. The facility is dilapidated beyond repair. It is potentially unsafe and unfit to showcase the vibrant and state-of-the-art agricultural sector in Ohio.
- **A new facility to replace Cooper Arena and Dairy Products Building** – Cooper Arena is outdated, and the Dairy Products Building is woefully damaged. Cooper Arena in its current state is not suited to accommodate today’s livestock shows and events. The Dairy Products Building needs to be replaced with a modern design to enhance the fairgoer experience when visiting the World-Famous Butter Cow and to increase the capability to serve more people during the fair with safe, wholesome dairy foods. The dairy industry is insistent on maintaining the Dairy Products Building as an independent site at the fairgrounds or to be combined with an upgraded Cooper Arena and be a key component of that new facility. The “building” design must be carefully planned for dairy products receiving, refrigeration, customer service and quality display areas for the butter cow and consumer messaging. This food service area should also be designed for year-round event usage for effective use of the assets.

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- **Viaduct** - Leverage and preserve use of the viaduct. The viaduct is an important feature of the fairgrounds that needs repair and maintenance. It is used during many events to house cattle when there is not enough barn space available.
 - **Parking** - Redesign and improve parking throughout the fairgrounds to meet the needs of the fair and the numerous other agricultural and non-ag events at the Expo Center. We recommend additional paved parking and suggest using the remaining land for camping and livestock truck and trailer parking. We also propose building new parking garages and that new buildings be constructed with parking options included.
 - **Safety and security** – Conduct an evaluation of the safety and security at the Expo Center and State Fair. Develop and implement recommendations to ensure the well-being of all who engage with the venue.
 - **A new multi-use agriculture building** - Build a new multi-use agriculture facility to provide flexibility and needed space for multiple events.

C. Experience

We agree that the overall guest experience at the Ohio Expo Center and State Fair must be upgraded. Many of the recommendations that we have shared will elevate the guest experience through improved facilities, amenities and programming. The following list highlights specific programming experiences that are especially important to our industry.

1. Youth agriculture education and workforce development

The Fair serves as the state’s key annual event for youth development for two of the largest youth programs, 4-H and FFA. We support maintaining the state’s commitment to youth agricultural education at the Fair. The State Fair and other ag-related events at the Expo Center provide forums for organizations like 4-H and FFA to educate and develop the next generation of Ohio agriculture’s leaders and the future workforce for the state as a whole.

2. Consumer education

Educating consumers about food, agriculture and State of Ohio programs and resources is fundamental to the fair’s mission. We recommend and support all efforts to enhance opportunities to increase consumer interaction, education and engagement. This will advance agriculture and food literacy. It also will provide opportunities for participation in civic activities and interactions with Ohio public sector leaders through exhibitions, events and activities, e.g., hosting state legislative hearings onsite at the fair.

D. Funding, Governance, and Operations

The Expo Center and fair have enormous potential to be a destination venue and showplace for Ohio agriculture and the state. However, it will require committed and sustained funding, strong leadership, and innovative and efficient operations.

1. Funding

We recommend multiple methods to generate sustainable funding for the Expo and State Fair. First, we suggest that the State of Ohio/General Assembly pass a multi-year funding measure in the state budget to improve facilities, grounds and infrastructure. The state's investment will enable the Expo Center and State Fair to significantly increase its earned revenue. We encourage the state to grant the Expo Center and Fair access, authority and flexibility to the funds the entity generates and not claim or repurpose those funds for other state matters. As part of efforts to generate additional earned revenue, we recommend that the Expo Center and Fair conduct a pricing study to ensure that it is competitive and properly positioned in the market to attract more events throughout the year. Similarly, in keeping with the mission, we recommend that the Expo and Fair consider special pricing for youth and agriculture organizations.

2. Governance

We believe that it is best for Ohio taxpayers and consumers if the Ohio Expo and State Fair remain a state-owned entity governed by the Administration of the Governor and a Board of Commissioners. We suggest that future representation on the Commission include additional professionals with expertise in agriculture and the business of entertainment. We recommend conducting an evaluation of the governance function as part of the Vision Plan process to identify future improvements.

3. Operations

In order for the Ohio Expo Center and State Fair to be successful, it must achieve operational excellence. This includes embracing innovation and technology, promoting efficiencies and securing the best talent. We recommend that the Vision Plan and short-term plan address the need to level up in these areas and outline pathways to do so.

III. Moving Forward Together...with Urgency

Thank you for the state's leadership and commitment to developing a long-term vision for the Expo Center and State Fair. We welcome future conversation and stand ready and willing to work together to advance the process. We are excited about the future possibilities and appreciate the state's serious and urgent consideration of these recommendations.

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