

Board of Directors Meeting Minutes

Ventura County Fairgrounds

31st District Agricultural Association - 10 W. Harbor Blvd. - Ventura, CA 93001 - (805) 648-3376

Website: venturacountyfair.org Contact: Heidi Ortiz, CEO

Tuesday, February 24th, 2026 at 9:00 a.m.
Ventura County Fairgrounds – Derby Club

I. Call to Order

Roll Call

Declaration of Recusal or Conflict of Interest

The meeting convened at 9:03 a.m. and called to order by President Ceja.

Directors present: President, Guillermo Rodriguez Ceja Jr., Vice President, Gloria Martinez, Betsy Chess, Leslie Cornejo, Leah Lacayo, Miriam Mack, Dan Long and Shanté Morgan-Carter.

Absent: None

Staff present: Heidi Ortiz, CEO, Jason Amelio, Deputy Manager, Madalyn Johnson, Concessions Manager, Megan Hook, PR & Marketing, Jenny Martin, Accounting Supervisor, Joey Clark, Maintenance Supervisor, and Eryn Johnson, Concessions Admin.

Guests Present: Davey Helm, Tom Kay and Mark Hartley

There were no conflicts of interest with any of the Board members that were present.

II. Pledge of Allegiance

President Ceja led all present in the Pledge of Allegiance.

III. Welcome and Introduction of Guests

Invitation for the public to introduce themselves (not mandatory).

CEO Ortiz introduced Ventura County Fair's newest employee, Joey Clark, the new Maintenance Supervisor.

Mr. Clark introduced himself to the board and thanked Mr. Amelio and CEO Ortiz for the opportunity and shared his background as a former business owner with 26 years of experience. The board welcomed him.

IV. Public Comment on Items Not on the Agenda

In accordance with State law, the Board will not comment or otherwise consider Public Comment matters until and unless such items have been properly noticed for a future meeting.

There were no public comments.

V. Presentations – Davey Helm, CEO of Helm & Sons Amusements

A. Mr. Helm, CEO of Helm and Sons Amusements, was introduced as the Fair's new carnival operator. He shared the following key points:

- **H-2B Visa Update:** Helm and Sons is the only carnival on the West Coast to receive H-2B visa workers this year, ensuring they can fulfill their contract. 81 other carnivals were eliminated from the program.
- **Commitment to Fairgrounds:** He pledged to invest in fairground improvements, including contributing toward an RV park, painting buildings, and asphalt repair, all at no cost to the Fair.
- **Enhanced Guest Experience:** He emphasized a fresh, rotating layout each year and a focus on creating a "portable amusement park" atmosphere with uniform aesthetics and behind-the-scenes pride. He will also provide a Disney tram that he had purchased and rebranded for guest transportation.
- **Sponsorship & Revenue:** He outlined plans to bring in new, non-conflicting sponsorships and create additional revenue streams through naming rights and front of line passes.
- **Company Background:** He shared that he is a third-generation carnival operator who has grown the business significantly since purchasing it in 2017. The company is now booked solid for the next five years.

Board members welcomed Mr. Helm and expressed enthusiasm for the new partnership, noting that the change will reduce staff workload and improve the Fair's overall appearance and operations.

VI. Meeting Minutes (discussion and/or approval)

A. January 27th, 2026 Board Meeting Minutes

MOTION: To approve the January 27th, 2026 Board Meeting minutes.

Board Member Name	Approved (Yes Vote)	Not Approved (No Vote)	Abstain
Director Chess (Motion)	X		
Director Cornejo	X		
Director Lacayo	X		
Director Long	X		
Director Mack (Second)	X		
Director Morgan-Carter	X		
Vice President Martinez	X		
President Ceja	X		

VII. Financial Reports (discussion and/or approval)

A. 2025 Statement of Operations

- a. This item was tabled until the March Board Meeting.

B. Discussion and possible action regarding the 2026 Budget

- a. CEO Ortiz reported that the Finance Committee, consisting of Director Cornejo and Director Lacayo, reviewed the narrative, summary of operations, and the 2025-2026 budget comparison. Prior to the vote, CEO Ortiz recognized Ms. Martin for her exceptional dedication and thanked all department heads for their commitment to developing a fiscally responsible budget.
- b. Director Cornejo moved to approve the 2026 budget, noting that the detailed comparison reflected thorough thought and effort in every line item and that each year the process improves in aligning with state requirements. Prior to the motion, she thanked CEO Ortiz, Director Lacayo, and Accounting Supervisor Ms. Martin, acknowledging Martin's exceptional work and stating that the Fair is fortunate to have her.

MOTION: To approve the 2026 Budget as presented.

Board Member Name	Approved (Yes Vote)	Not Approved (No Vote)	Abstain
Director Chess	X		
Director Cornejo (Motion)	X		
Director Lacayo	X		
Director Long (Second)	X		
Director Mack	X		
Director Morgan-Carter	X		
Vice President Martinez	X		
President Ceja	X		

VIII. New Business

A. Discussion and possible action regarding the Fairgrounds Foundation taking over the Food and Beverage

- CEO Ortiz stated that the Foundation has been exploring taking over the Food and Beverage opportunity since last year. The goal is to generate additional revenue for capital improvement projects around the Fairgrounds. This is a way the Foundation can support their mission to help provide financial support for facilities and deferred maintenance, moving beyond smaller scale fundraisers to create a significant funding source.
- CEO Ortiz introduced Mark Hartley, who is a member of the Foundation Board. He explained that the current operator's agreement ends September 30th of this year and the Foundation views this as a significant revenue opportunity, with all net proceeds returning to the Fairgrounds. The Foundation has voted to enter a due diligence phase, consulting with Fair First to develop a business plan, assess capital

needs, and audit the 4% capital and marketing funds from the current contract. Supervisor Matt LaVere has agreed to serve as their attorney on a pro-bono basis. Board members expressed strong support, citing the Foundation's strength, the expertise of those involved, and the potential for long-term capital improvement funding.

- Following the discussion, Director Mack made a motion to authorize CEO Ortiz to work with the Foundation to move forward with the Food and Beverage operation.

MOTION: To approve CEO Ortiz to work with the Foundation to move forward with the food and beverage operation.

Board Member Name	Approved (Yes Vote)	Not Approved (No Vote)	Abstain
Director Chess (Second)	X		
Director Cornejo	X		
Director Lacayo	X		
Director Long	X		
Director Mack (Motion)	X		
Director Morgan-Carter	X		
Vice President Martinez	X		
President Ceja	X		

B. Discussion and possible action regarding whether to adopt a District resolution confirming that the simulcast wagering conducted on the District's property best serves the interest of the District.

- CEO Ortiz reported that after further research and consultation with other fairs, a Board resolution is not required. The California Horse Racing Board (CHRB) requires facilities to have updated licenses; however, as part of the California Authority of Racing Fairs (CARF) organization, the Fair is covered under their master resolution, which was submitted to CDFA. CEO Ortiz will instead provide a letter from President Ceja confirming her appointment date as CEO to obtain her occupational license.

IX. Old Business

A. Surfer's Point Update

- CEO Ortiz updated the board on the Surfers Point project. California Construction Authority (CCA) conducted a site walk and provided a list of concerns which were forwarded to the City. The outstanding action items from a December Surfers Point Ad Hoc Committee Meeting remain unresolved, and staff will not sign off until all questions are answered. Mr. Amelio shared that the parking lot opened February 21st, operating at a \$652 loss under the current \$2 pricing. He explained that switching to a \$5 rate would yield modest profit, and staffing will be reduced. He did note that the exiting traffic flow during recent events was the smoothest to date. The City did confirm that they are responsible for parking enforcement.

B. 2026 Fair Update

Jason Amelio – Arena and VIP Manager

Provided an update on the 2026 Fair. Conversations have begun with eRentals regarding turf and tenting for the VIP arena, and planning is underway with security providers and Viking Entertainment for grounds entertainment. Ms. Johnson has taken the lead on rentals and layout changes for VIP and arena are being explored.

Megan Hook – Media and Sponsorships

Ms. Hook provided a marketing and sponsorship update. Fair pre-sale ticketing products are being built and will launch on a timeline coordinated with the new carnival operator. The Youth Poster Contest begins this Sunday, running through April 3rd, and is open to Ventura County youth, grades K-12, with no entry fee. The winner receives \$500, with \$250 and \$100 awards for second and third place. Following the contest, the Read and Ride program will launch earlier than previous years to better accommodate school schedules. The website will be transitioned to Fair mode soon; post-Fair, it will be split into three separate sites (Fair, Fairgrounds, and Oktoberfest) to improve sponsor management and search engine optimization. A history page timeline has been added, developed with input from Director Chess and Director Mack. Post Fair survey results were distributed; while valuable, Ms. Hook noted that the respondent demographic skews older with no children at home, which should be considered when reviewing feedback. On sponsorships, momentum has shifted with sponsors now approaching the Fair, bringing new opportunities and partners.

Madalyn Johnson – Concessions, Commercial and Community Manager

Ms. Johnson provided a concessions update. Vendor and rental space planning is progressing, with excitement around the new carnival partner. She outlined the thorough vendor selection process, which considers space availability, sales history, product quality, customer service, secret shopper feedback, product balance, uniqueness, references, and licensing compliance. Community outreach is expanding, with conversations underway to bring in new community partners, nonprofit participants, and a potential lead generation booth with the Museum of Ventura County. She also thanked the County and Vice President Martinez for their assistance in making progress with the health department. The fair is nearly full for 2026.

Emilee Inez - Exhibits Supervisor

Ms. Inez was attending Super School to network and learn best practices for Exhibits.

CEO Ortiz continues to work with department heads to advance operations and will collaborate with Mr. Helm on carnival promotions, layout, and operations. The admissions team, Dustin Stafford and Total Event Access Management, has been secured for 2026. Discussions will be held with Rick Barrios and Joe Evans regarding their return as security supervisors.

X. Board Correspondence

- A. Memo from Mike Francesconi at California Dept. of Food & Agriculture, Fairs & Expositions: 2026 State Rules for California Fairs

- a. President Ceja noted that the board received a memo from the California Department of Food and Agriculture Fairs and Expositions branch regarding 2026 State Rules for California fairs. CEO Ortiz provided a reference list of the rule changes for the Board's information.

XI. Consent Agenda: Items hereunder on the Consent Agenda are considered routine, not requiring separate discussion and will be enacted in one motion. Individual items A, 1-2, are approved by the vote that approves the Consent Agenda, unless an item is pulled for separate consideration.

- A. Agreements
 - 1. Standard Agreements
 - 2. Rental Agreements - Interim

MOTION: To approve the consent agenda with items A, 1-2.

Board Member Name	Approved (Yes Vote)	Not Approved (No Vote)	Abstain
Director Chess	X		
Director Cornejo	X		
Director Lacayo (Motion)	X		
Director Long	X		
Director Mack	X		
Director Morgan-Carter (Second)	X		
Vice President Martinez	X		
President Ceja	X		

XII. CEO Report

- She attended Lobby Days in Sacramento with the California Emergency Response & Resiliency Venues & Fairgrounds (CERRVF) group, participating in approximately 65 meetings with chiefs of staff, assembly members, and senators. The key message was that fairgrounds serve as critical emergency response hubs and we are more than just a Fair. For instance during the Thomas Fire we were activated and housed Cal Fire, Red Cross, CalOES, local law enforcement. We also acted as a food distribution center, taken in animal evacuations. She emphasized that fairgrounds receive minimal state funding and advocated for a steady funding stream. A follow-up meeting was arranged with the budget committee, and progress is being made toward potential legislation.
- A Maintenance Employee of the Month program is being implemented to recognize and motivate staff. The first awards for January and February will be presented this Friday. She acknowledged the maintenance team's exceptional teamwork in successfully managing five events over the weekend.
- The Foundation Board approved a donation to purchase a utility truck from Mr. Clark. The truck was already budgeted, and the Foundation's support allowed the purchase to move forward.

- She reminded Board members to submit their Form 700 statements by the next board meeting. Those needing admission ticket numbers for the past year should contact her directly.

XIII. President's Report

- He reported that he has walked the grounds several times this month and highlighted the new front parking lot, which is now open.
- He noted that several interested contractors have reached out to meet with Maintenance Supervisor Mr. Clark to discuss potential donations to the Fairgrounds, including submersible pumps and a golf cart. These contractors will work with staff to develop a game plan for capital improvements once funding becomes available. Any work will go out to public bid and comply with apprenticeship program requirements, providing local trainees the opportunity to build lasting improvements on the fairgrounds.
- He also expressed excitement about working with Mr. Helm and his team and thanked them and Mr. Hartley for attending the meeting.

XIV. Director's Comments

Director Mack

- She expressed enthusiasm for the excitement surrounding the Fair and Fairgrounds. She thanked Ms. Hook for the history page timeline, noting it exceeded her expectations. She also commended the budget team for their work on a conservative and well-explained budget and expressed confidence that revenues would be exceeded.
- Regarding the Derby Club, she noted that she and Vice President Martinez met to discuss the matter. She suggested adding a future agenda item to present their thinking and seek Board concurrence on directing staff to begin gathering information.

Director Chess

- She remarked that the meeting was amazing, with much information and enthusiasm shared. She extended thanks to Mr. Clark, Mr. Helm and Mr. Hartley for their contributions.

Director Cornejo

- She shared that she had had an involved month and expressed excitement about the year coming together, noting she couldn't wait to see the Fair.
- She offered a suggestion regarding the livestock auction packets, with materials now being online for buyers, she noted that some long time buyers may prefer printed copies. She suggested offering to print packets for those who want them and possibly delivering them as a personal touch. She also proposed engaging 4-H or FFA organizations to assist with delivery to support the auction without adding extra work for staff during the transition to an electronic system.

Director Long

- He expressed enthusiasm for the morning's meeting and the direction the Fair is heading. He noted that he feels the organization is on the precipice of turning things around and continuing on a positive path.
- He also shared a thought regarding the casino upstairs, suggesting that the ad hoc committee consider taking a firmer stance on not renewing the lease after this year to encourage their departure and allow the Fair to move forward.

Director Lacayo

- She reflected that it had been a great meeting. She noted that Senator Monique Limón's husband previously served on the Santa Barbara Fair Board, suggesting he may be a valuable contact for future lobbying efforts in Sacramento.
- She welcomed Mr. Helm and the new Maintenance Supervisor Mr. Clark. She also thanked Ms. Hook for her hard work and commended President Ceja for his involvement with the unions and apprenticeship program, noting that unlike other venues where trainees build and tear down, here they contribute to lasting maintenance projects.
- She expressed excitement for the upcoming Fair and appreciation for the plans shared. She also noted that she learned a new term "Super School" and now understands it refers to superintendent school.

Director Morgan-Carter

- She thanked staff for their hard work, with special recognition to CEO Ortiz.

Vice President Martinez

- She thanked Directors Cornejo and Lacayo, CEO Ortiz, and Accounting Supervisor Ms. Martin for their detailed work on the budget.
- She commended Ms. Johnson for her courage in working with the county on permit streamlining, noting the effort will benefit the Fair and other local organizations.
- She thanked Mr. Hartley and the Foundation Board for their presentation and expressed excitement about their developments.
- She reported that the chamber executive roundtable was well attended, thanked Director Mack for their productive Derby Club discussion, and invited board members to join her at the LA County Fair in May.

XV. Future Agenda Items

1. Ad Hoc Committee regarding Derby Club progress update

XVI. Closed Session

The Board is authorized to meet in Closed Session for the following reasons:

1. For conferring with and receiving advice from legal counsel regarding pending litigation per Gov. Code Section 1112(e)(2).
2. For Personnel Matters including annual CEO Evaluation per Gov. Code Section 11126(a)(1).

President Ceja convened into closed session at 10:31 am.

XVII. Report Out of Closed Session

Report any action items by the Board during Closed Session

President Ceja reconvened at 11:18 am.

President Ceja reported that the Board approved a positive CEO evaluation with five goals and a recommendation to retain CEO Ortiz. The Board also approved a motion to recommend a pay increase through CDFA for the maximum amount. Both motions were approved unanimously, with Director Morgan Carter absent for the second vote.

XVIII. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 11:29 a.m.

Submitted by: 
Eryn Johnson, Concessions Admin

Approved by: 
Heidi Ortiz, CEO Ventura Fairgrounds

Approved by: 
Guillermo Rodriguez Ceja Jr., Board President