

***By Russ Pankonin, The Imperial Republican Co-Publisher***

Just a few years ago, fair board members were scratching their heads, wondering just what they had to do for Chase County residents to have a greater buy-in of the fair.

What fair board members feared was an apparent lack of complacency in the county that could jeopardize the long-standing tradition the fair had built over the years as one of the greatest county fairs in Nebraska.

We're all proud that the Chase County Fair has often been referred to as Western Nebraska's State Fair or Western Nebraska's Grandest County Fair.

That tradition began a generation ago when local visionaries made outstanding entertainment one of the hallmarks of this fair.

Over the years, the Chase County Fair has played host to some of the biggest names in the music industry.

But for some reason, people in Chase County seemed to be taking our fair for granted. Left unchecked, that spelled disaster for the fair.

So, the fair board joined their minds with others in the fair and entertainment business to turn that trend around. And turn it around they have!

Over the past two to three years, there's been a definite resurgence in the support for the fair.

This year's fair marked a first in many areas, including the highest number of corporate sponsors ever at 34.

Some of the other changes made included beer sales at the Friday and Saturday shows, a VIP hospitality area at the shows for corporate sponsors and their guests, the sale of tickets on the Internet, the creation of a Chase County Fair e-mail fan club, and the hiring of a new carnival.

These changes have paid dividends as evidenced by the attendance at this year's shows, with a total of more than 4,700 attending the two shows.

But putting on the kind of fair that epitomizes the tradition of the Chase County Fair doesn't come without a lot of hard work and a significant risk of budget dollars.

In Chase County, taxpayers provide \$70,000 of support for the fair—\$60,000 for general operation and another \$10,000 that's set aside annually for capital improvements.

When I first became associated with the fair in the 1980s, the budgeted amount was in the neighborhood of \$80-85,000 per year. So unlike most of your taxes, which have gone up, the fair board has been challenged to do more with less over the years. The fair board has not even been granted the annual 2 percent increase allowed it by state statute.

When the fair board went to the commissioners to request their annual budget last month, the first motion made was to cut the operating budget from \$60,000 to \$50,000. Fortunately, that motion died for the lack of a second and a later motion for \$60,000 was approved.

In addition, the county, which owns the fair grounds facility, pays the fair board \$500 per month to manage the grounds and pay for expenses during the year, such as heat and electricity for the buildings and grounds. Still, that's a bargain for the commissioners and you, the taxpayer.

Despite a reduction in funding over the years, the fair board is to be credited for their foresight in turning around the direction of the fair and working to keep the fair's stellar reputation intact.

That couldn't happen without your support as well. One only needed to look across the fairgrounds to see all the volunteerism and dedication that goes into making this fair second to none.

Let's continue to support this partnership between ourselves and the fair to the fullest and

insure that the Chase County Fair becomes "Nebraska's Grandest County Fair!"