

Boarding rent hike stirs equestrian protests at Orange County Fairgrounds

BY HORSETRADER STAFF

COSTA MESA – Equestrians of all ages, sizes and disciplines – many with their horses in-hand – gathered outside Costa Mesa City Hall April 25 in protest of stabling rent increases at the Orange County Fairgrounds Equestrian Center. It was the most recent of multiple clashes over the past 18 months by local equestrians who are concerned that the big rent increases would impact and eventually lead to the closing of the facility altogether.

The effort came during a scheduled meeting of the Orange County Fair & Event Center's Board of Directors.

The Orange County Equestrian Center has long represented the region's agricultural history and heritage, and horses played a significant role in California fairs throughout the 1900s. Even further back, horses were an integral part of the area's origins when cattle ranching was a pillar of its economy.

In 1980, a 15-acre equestrian center was established in the northeast section of the OC

Fairgrounds, becoming a hub for horse-related activities for the community. In 2003, the Equestrian Center lost half its land after officials repurposed 7.5 acres for a parking lot.

Officials reported that changes are in order to offset losses of a reported \$227,805 per year, while also facing deferred facility improvements and other obligations not covered in the previous Equestrian Center operator's contract. In short, the cost of keeping horses would have to go up, they said.

To close the gap, directors in March approved a phased-in rent increase for those who board horses and use the Equestrian Center for private lessons and nonprofit programs and classes. Under the that plan, a 144-square-foot stall would gradually climb from \$644 per month to \$1,130 by January 2025 — an increase of 75 percent. Equestrians said the hike would make the aging facility one of the costliest in Orange County and a mass exodus of horses and programs would follow.

Discussion to lower cost



Orange County equestrians unite to save center

increases to \$979 per month by Jan. 1, 2025 -- with an initial increase to \$756 starting on this June 15 -- was made by the board, along with assurances it would continue to mine expense-saving cuts in operations to reduce impact further.

"Staff continues to evaluate expenses," OC Fair & Event Center Chief Executive Michele Richards said. "Should we find additional savings, we will pass those onto our boarders and trainers as soon as possible."

Carolyn Beaver, a Corona del Mar resident who takes lessons at the facility, said while she appreciated efforts to reduce the rent increase, she was still con-

cerned about the fate of boarders and trainers who may have to cut programs. She further questioned how OCFEC would be able to fulfill its ambitious plans for public programming if equestrians were forced to leave.

"In order to provide public programs involving horses, all these details need to be worked out, and experienced professionals need to be engaged to provide the services," Beaver told the board. "[But] you really haven't spoken very much to the trainers that are on site and available to assist you."

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