

Jackson County Fairgrounds find niche as venue for music festivals

By Bill Chapin, Jackson Citizen Patriot

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The closure of Jackson Harness Raceway in 2008 was a financial blow to the Jackson County Fairgrounds, but it has opened up the fair's grandstand and track to other forms of entertainment. The facilities are proving to be an attractive option for rock concert promoters, who have booked two music festivals at the fairgrounds this summer.

Rockapalooza on June 19 will feature such bands as Sevendust and OTEP, while Great White will headline the JackTown Music Fest on July 3. Add in the shows at the county fair in August featuring Styx and Rodney Atkins, and there will be at least one major concert on the grandstand stage every month this summer.

Promoters of both music festivals say they hope to make them annual events. If they prove successful, it could pave the way to the fairgrounds becoming a viable summer concert venue.

"It opens up a lot of possibilities," said Daniel Bamm of Henrietta Township, who is organizing the JackTown Music Fest along with Jackson native Jonathan Sayles of Nashville. "It gives people an opportunity to stay here in Jackson, perform here in Jackson and keep Jackson dollars here in Jackson."

Rockapalooza organizer Tim Corser, a Jackson native now working for a North Carolina music promotion company, said the fairgrounds are "a perfect setup for what we're trying to do."

Based on other concerts he has put together, Corser doubts Jackson can support more than one major concert at the fairgrounds a month, but "as long as the ticket price stays low ... I think it could (be) a good music venue in the state," he said.

The fair doesn't own any lighting or sound equipment, so it must be rented.

"Our production (cost) is \$37,000, and that's before you pay the bands, which is ridiculous," Corser said.

Renting the fairgrounds is relatively inexpensive. Though total cost can vary based on electrical needs, the fair offers use of the stage and grandstand for \$3,000, fair office administrator Denise Owen said.

Owen said the fair board is planning some upgrades to the facilities, including a permanent public address system, that could make it more suitable as a concert venue.

Concerts were just one idea that came out of a brainstorming session aimed at finding new, year-round revenue for the fairgrounds. Owen said the fair board is pursuing the idea of offering drive-in movies next year, and promoters have shown interest in bringing flat-track motorcycle racing to the grounds.

"A lot of ideas were put out there, and we're starting to build on those," she said.