

Curt Pringle rebuttal: OC fairgrounds sale

By CURT PRINGLE

Mayor of Anaheim, former Orange County fairgrounds board member

The Orange County fairgrounds has been a cultural touchstone for Orange County residents for more than a century. Memories of the fair are rich and lasting.

The fairgrounds provide more to our community than just the fair, though. It is a countywide cultural, historic, entertainment asset.

The four years before I was elected mayor of Anaheim, I served on the Orange County Fair board. And in 2002, I was the president of the board. The Orange County Fair means a lot to me.

But the fair is governed by an odd governmental structure. It, like all original county fairs, was formed under the state of California. And, even though the operations and the budgets of county fairs are separate from the state's general fund budget that pays for annual state operations, the cash reserves, the assets and the fair-owned land has been enticing for the state budgeters each year there is a state budget shortfall.

In this past year's budget, the governor initially proposed selling many state properties, including San Quentin prison, the Los Angeles Coliseum and the Orange County fairgrounds, to raise money for a one-time budget solution. In every other case, the property was taken off the list – except for the OC fairgrounds.

The argument has been made that a sale of the fairgrounds would raise tens of millions of dollars for the state budget deficit and a private nonprofit group could provide local control of the fairgrounds ["No deal to 'No sale,'" Editorial, Jan. 6]. But nothing in that argument is certain.

The price for this property is completely dependent on the use that can occur on this property. The city of Costa Mesa has this property zoned for fair use. Therefore, the value of this property will be relatively low. And under that scenario, it will not generate much money to the state.

In addition to that, why should we sell off our property assets at a time when land prices are so low?

And, further, nothing in the law that authorized the sale ensures that this property will remain a county fair. The Costa Mesa City Council has certainly been clear that they want this to remain a fair. But it would only take three of five members on a future council to re-zone the property for other uses. If a private buyer, whether a nonprofit or a developer, were to buy the fairgrounds, it would only take a simple zoning change to wipe out the fairgrounds and replace it with high rises, casinos, tract housing or big-box stores.

But let's stop and think of the logic of selling. This countywide asset, if sold would generate only a token sum to help the state out of its fiscal condition, and yet put into jeopardy the 11th-most-visited fair in all of North America.

I'm proud that Orange County residents are standing up in an effort to stop the sale of our fairgrounds. I support Assemblyman Jose Solorio's Assembly Bill 1590, which would cancel the sale and encourage everyone to contact Gov. Schwarzenegger and ask him to stop the sale immediately. It's important to protect this site, which is both a revenue producer and job generator.

The Orange County fairgrounds has been part of our culture and heritage for 120 years. We must all make our voices heard. We can stop this sale, not just to preserve this significant piece of Orange County's heritage, but to protect the opportunity to enjoy the Orange County Fair long into the future.