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O.C. Fair directors gave themselves \$376,000 in free concert tickets

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The Orange County Register

Story Highlights

OC WATCHDOG: Freebies exceeded the limit set by the state. Meanwhile, the Pacific Amphitheatre concert series is \$1 million in the red.

Orange County Fair Board members may have to face the music for giving themselves 8,892 free tickets worth \$376,532 for top-name concerts at the Pacific Amphitheatre during the last two years.

Auditors have warned the board twice that excessive freebies could be construed as a gift of public money and could result in the state withholding the fair's ability to spend \$30 million a year.



[Fergie](#) performs to a sold out Pacific Amphitheatre last year.

TRISHA LYNCH, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Who got the free tickets?

Orange County Fair Board members gave themselves, their families and their associates nearly \$400,000 in free concert tickets at the Pacific Amphitheatre. See who got the free tickets for the best seats in the house, while the public stood in line.

Steve Lyle, spokesman for the Department of Food and Agriculture, told The Register: "We hope to continue communicating and hope they will come into compliance. If that doesn't happen we have the ability to withhold their budget."

But so far the OC board is digging in its heels and refusing to give up the concert tickets.

"Unless someone forces a change, it's not likely to change," said board chairman Dale Dykema. "No one has given us a directive that says, 'This is what you have to do.'"

Fair records show directors paid nothing for the best seats in the house - mostly in the orchestra pit -- for such attractions as [Bob Dylan](#), Fergie and Seal, doling them out to friends, family members, business associates, political cronies and, in a few cases, to the underprivileged.

The wife of former Sheriff Mike Carona, Deborah, took the most tickets, giving many to her husband's co-workers and political donors, an Orange County Register analysis of the fair records shows.

Only directors Dykema and David Padilla consistently gave their tickets to charity.

The board's largesse continued although the concert series is nearly \$1 million in the red since the amphitheater reopened in 2003. In the last two years alone, board members grabbed enough tickets to fill the 8,000-seat amphitheater and still have people standing in the aisles.

State audits concluded in 2005 and 2006 that the board was taking and giving away too many passes for concerts, fair admission, parking and catered meals. The freebies were well over the limit of 4 percent of the fair's gross paid admission, set by the state.

By board policy, directors get 26 tickets per concert during the fair season, totaling about 500 seats per director for the year. There is no limit how many of those tickets they can save for themselves. The rest, according to loosely worded guidelines drafted by the board, are supposed to be used for promotion, outreach or potential business opportunities.

In 41 instances, individual directors exceeded that 26-ticket policy, drawing as many as 63 tickets for a single concert. Fair officials said they weren't aware that the policy wasn't always followed.

The 9-member fair board's total allotment -- 234 seats per concert when they follow the policy -- remains far above the industry standard, where maybe 100 seats per show are reserved for band associates, the media and music business professionals, said Gary Bongiovanni editor-in-chief of Pollstar magazine. Other fair directors in California take only a handful of concert tickets for each show.

"That's a sizable slice of the good seats," said Bongiovanni. "In most cases, the bands don't want to see comp tickets in the front row. They want to save those seats for their fans. They like to feed off the energy of somebody who fought real hard to get the tickets."

Orange County music fans without political connections paid up to \$89.99 per seat at the Pacific Amphitheatre, crossing their fingers they'll get close to the stage. Ticket prices vary according to the show and the seat. The free seats received by the directors, in the pit and the orchestra sections, command the highest prices in the 8,000-seat venue.

"People like me get screwed," said Jim Branagan, a concert-goer who paid top dollar for a front row seat for Crosby, Stills and Nash in 2003 and ended up sitting behind Mike Carona and a wall of boisterous off-duty sheriff's deputies. One of the deputies demanded Branagan turn over a guitar pick that was tossed from the stage, he said.

"You're not supposed to use your office to obtain that kind of advantage," said Branagan, who runs a concert website livefromthepit.com.

But the board members don't see the freebies as an unfair advantage. The fair board members are appointed by the governor and are not paid for their service, which includes monthly meetings.

"It's a resource we use to help promote the fair," said board member Padilla, a member of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. "The fair is fun. It is an enjoyable part of being on the board."

But "fair promotion" is so intangible that neither Padilla nor other fair officials could point to one concrete benefit of giving board members so many free concert tickets.

"We can look at the continued attendance at the concert series. We can look at attendance to the fair. Is that totally attributable to the complimentary tickets? I don't know," said Becky Bailey-Findley, the fair's general manager, who is scheduled to retire in August.

Could the board use the nearly \$200,000 a year - the cost of the free concert seats -- to bring down the price of show tickets or improve other parts of the fair?

"Yes, we could use that money differently. Of course we could," said Bailey-Findley. "I don't know if it would be the highest or best use."

For now, board associates and family members light up the phones when each concert season is announced, jockeying for their favorite artists.

"It's a major summer social event," said Assemblyman Todd [Spitzer](#). "It's a relationship-building opportunity." Spitzer provided documentation that he repaid the fair for the tickets he received.

Top county leaders for both major political parties, Republican Dykema and Democrat Frank Barbaro, have served on the board and given tickets to the powerful and well-connected.

So serious are the demands for tickets that when attorney Ruben Smith was suddenly replaced on the board - right before the 2007 fair - other directors gave him some of their tickets so he could make good on commitments to those seeking free shows.

While most county fairgrounds are under the oversight of the California Department of Food and Agriculture, there is no statewide guideline for how to handle concert tickets, other than the 4 percent limit on all freebies.

Board members at other fairgrounds throughout California - including the Los Angeles County Fair - receive between four to six complimentary tickets per show, for such acts as the B-52s and Earth, Wind and Fire. If they want more, they have to pay.

"Twenty-six tickets? No way," said Ardie Der Manouel, a member of the Fresno fair board. "Wow! That's astonishing." Among the artists who've performed at the Fresno fair are [Ray Charles](#), the [Jonas Brothers](#), Daughtry and the Black Crowes.

Orange County's policy dates back to a time when shows at the fair were free and featured lesser known artists. But with the reopening of the Pacific Amphitheatre in 2003, the freebies started adding up to real money, so much so that state auditors in 2005 ordered the fair to start keeping track of who gets tickets.

Fair director Deborah Carona, who faces unrelated federal corruption charges with her husband and his mistress, is by far the biggest ticket taker on the board, collecting 1,227 tickets valued at nearly \$51,000. She received 1,118 free seats directly over the two-year period and got another 109 as part of a ticket-swapping system among board members.

The single largest recipient of her largesse was the Orange County Sheriff's Department, whose top officials received at least 261 free tickets worth \$11,867. The records show that Leann Rimes was their favorite act.

Carona declined comment through her attorney.

While board members spoke of trying to get the tickets into the hands of people otherwise unable to afford a concert, the free shows mostly went to the well-heeled and well-connected. Like Sonia Grech, the wife of Brea limousine manufacturer Ed Grech; political consultant Adam Probolsky, who was a Mike Carona advisor; and BMW dealer Dennis Assael.

Only one board member, Republican leader Dykema, gave nearly all his tickets to charitable organizations - although some of the representatives for those charities are also Dykema's employees. In all, Dykema personally used 20 tickets, out of the 1,095 he received. He was the third largest ticket-taker in the two-year period.

"Most of the performers there are just not from my genre," Dykema said. "And my wife is not terribly excited about going out to performances."

Padilla was the second highest ticket-getter at 1,106. Fourth was Gary Hayakawa, a board member since 2004, with 1,070 tickets worth \$45,089. He and his family used at least 321 of the tickets, valued at more than \$13,700. President of Three Star Nursery, Hayakawa gave many of the other tickets to his employees or to other nurseries.

"I have a large family. We really don't get compensated for all our time," Hayakawa responded. "We didn't know other fair boards weren't giving out as much."

Contact the writer: Contact Saavedra at 796-6930 or tsaavedra@ocregister.com

A few sample comments:

cchristine wrote:

They should all be criminally charged! Not surprised to hear Carona again connected to another corruption scandal. Thanks to all you OC Fair directors for your continued larceny...

4/11/2008 3:47 PM PDT

oceanwanderlust wrote:

I wonder how many of Dykema's employee's actually forwarded the tickets onto the charities that they represent vs how many just pocketed them?

4/12/2008 7:20 AM PDT

ocman18 wrote:

There should be a link with the names of the people who received the tickets as well. Again follow the tickets and see if there had been an exchange of political donations before or after these ticket giveaways. Sounds like the possibility of a quid pro quo is huge. Not sure why the Register didnt have a link of all these concert goers.

Power corrupts, especially in the ranks of the OC Republican political elite. Dale Dykema is tightly connected to the Lincoln Club and his giving tickets to "charity organizations" headed by his own employees really doesnt pass the smell test. Most others on this list also have ties to the Republican elite and Lincoln Club.

4/12/2008 9:04 AM PDT

ocman18 wrote:

Interesting there doesnt appear to be any run of the mill police of Deborah Carona's list of giveaways. You see current and former Sheriffs administrators including Captain Christine Murray who seems to have received the most of any of the freebies from law enforcement.

Also interesting is Murray received many of these tickets right around the time she was caught soliciting money for Carona's campaign illegally. Of course the District Attorney never accused or charged her with any crime. Looks like the District Attorney likes to jump up and down alot but never about high ranking republican politicians or their fundraisers!

Follow the money.

But of course all is better now as the Lincoln Club has a tighter grip on the Sheriffs Department with the current administrator. The Lincoln Club will help the Sheriffs Department just like they did when they gave the citizens Carona and his wife. Thanks boys.

Ah yes the fair board did have their token Democrat. That way the Republicans can yell and scream at this article saying see its not just us that are corrupt!

4/12/2008 10:18 AM PDT

anon64 wrote:

I have worked in local government for many years and, in defense of local officials, sometimes these unsolicited tickets simply end up in their "in box" with no explanation. Some people take them, some people don't. Although it is somewhat embarrassing to have to return gifts, my public sector boss refuses to accept gifts, or he gives them away to local charities. Unfortunately, ethical public officials are few and far between but I am proud that my boss is the exception. Other public organizations don't have ethical leadership and it takes a very strong and experienced leader to just say "no" when tempted, and I assure you those temptations are daily occurrences. What we have in Orange County for the most part is weak and inexperienced leadership and that's the reason OCSD appears to be one of the most corrupt organizations in modern local history. In the OC, the good 'ole boy system has reigned for years. We just need change at the top and that means NO to Jack Anderson and unfortunately NO to Bill Hunt as much as I like the guy - simply because they are both a part of the old Carona regime. However, OC Register, you do need to research a bit further the numbers of LEGITIMATE charities provided with the comped tickets; otherwise this is a biased story. Good job Register, your reporting is improving a bit.

4/12/2008 1:18 PM PDT

