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Teamwork Makes a Great State Fair Greater

By: Errol McKoy

More than 20,000 screaming, preteen fans standing for hours in Texas' sweltering heat — it might seem like a carnival organizer's worst nightmare, but at the State Fair of Texas, Dallas, it was an opportunity to show off some exceptional teamwork.

We knew in advance that Oct. 8, 2007, was going to be a big day for the State Fair. It was Columbus Day, and many people were planning a holiday trip to the fairgrounds. It was free day at the fair for thousands of children from 22 local school districts.

We had also planned a free concert at 3 p.m. with the Jonas Brothers, a Disney Channel

sensation and one of the nation's hottest boy bands. We had received calls for months from tweens and their parents asking about the concert.

It took a lot of planning, but when the concert day arrived, we were ready. Our Gates Department began manning their posts early to prepare for the fans that started arriving at 3 a.m.

Our Operations staff set up a nearby Lost Children's Center and 60-bed, emergency medical tent to help fairgoers with the day's intense heat. They also positioned fire hoses that we used to help cool off the crowd.

Our entertainment coordinator arranged to have the band flown to the fairgrounds by helicopter because the roads surrounding the

Photos on this page by Kevin Brown



It was one of the busiest and most hectic days in our history and the event went off without a hitch — thanks to our staff's diligence and cooperation.



Photo by Harrison Evans

Teamwork is the foundation of the State Fair's success and the promise of our future.

fairgrounds were too congested with traffic. The Concessions Department delivered water and ice continuously to the medical tent and set up additional beverage locations around the concert stage. The Dallas Police Department, augmented by our security staff, established three spotter locations to monitor the crowd. And our Public Relations Department manned the phone bank and spoke to the print and broadcast media about traffic alerts and crowd totals.

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Teamwork is the foundation of the State Fair's success and the promise of our future. Our small, 30-member staff explodes to more than 6,000 during fair time, when each of our ticket sellers, plumbers, police officers, ride operators, grounds keepers, parking attendants, and more come together as a terrific, unstoppable team.

Take, for example, our Wine Garden — one of our most popular attractions during our 24-day fair. Visitors of the garden may sample wines of the world, attend wine classes or chat with sommeliers, all while sitting in a beautiful courtyard setting.

You might be surprised to learn that the Wine Garden was the brainchild of our Auto Show Director Kelly Pound. Our car-and-truck guru organizes the refined exhibit each year, but Kelly turns to the expertise of our Games Department to design and create the Wine Garden's handsome surroundings. How does the Auto Show pair up with the Games Department to create one of our fair's most beautiful and cultured attractions? Well, that's cooperation at its best.

Teamwork, of course, takes a lot of work. We expect a lot from our employees, but they know we'll give them a lot in return. Our mid-way workers are required to wear crisp uniforms, be well rested and mindful of personal hygiene, be freshly shaven with clean haircuts, and refrain from smoking on the job among other requisites.

That's a tall order for a long fair held in the heat of a Texas summer. So, to help our team live up to those very high expectations, we've made a multimillion-dollar commitment to

acquire land for Billy Baxter Park — a gated, state-of-the art RV facility for our fair-time employees — and its surrounding services.

Named in memory of one of our longtime ride operators, Billy Baxter Park has all the amenities, including electricity, water, sewage, phone and even Internet hookups for those employees who like to relax by surfing the 'net. A welcome oasis away from the frenzied fun of our busy fair, the park features a convenience store where workers can buy cold milk, fresh fruit, uniforms and other staples at cost. The site is equipped with a large laundry room as well as clean showers and restrooms. We provide 24-hour security and a drug-free environment with on-site drug testing facilities. We also offer free shuttle service to and from the

park so our hard-working workers don't have to walk home after a long day on the grounds. But the teamwork doesn't stop there.

The State Fair's air-conditioned employee cafeteria offers tasty, healthy and economical food. We don't charge the cafeteria operator a percentage of the sales to keep the food prices as affordable as possible for our workers. And we open the cafeteria 10 days before the fair begins and continue service almost a week after the event closes, ensuring our team receives nutritious meals throughout their work cycle.

Our John P. Thompson General Service Center — named for a former State Fair chair — houses a bank where workers can easily get

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As [Vince Lombardi] once said, "Individual commitment to a group effort — that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work."

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change, turn in tills, and cash checks. Also in the building, the Dallas Police Department has a private, high-tech command center where officers may conduct business in comfort while maintaining a 24-hour watch over the fairgrounds.

Safety is one of the most important of all our team efforts. Our weekly amusement ride-safety meeting ensures that ride owners, operators, and inspectors are always in communication sharing tips, advice, and advisories. Our ride-safety professionals train and re-train operators regularly and recognize great work by operators with rewards and recognition in the meeting.

And since the safety of our own team members is as important as the safety of fair visitors, we've implemented several procedures to increase security in and around our work areas. All concessionaires and exhibitors are given

complimentary, worry-free credentials to enter and exit the fair. Our games staff provides communication radios to all ride supervisors and owners.

Our easy coupon system — fairgoers buy coupons from designated booths across the fairgrounds and use the coupons for food and ride purchases — ensures that many of our concessionaires and operators don't have to handle or carry cash, making their jobs safer. A decade ago, our cash handling, tickets, and coupons areas were scattered in nooks and crannies across our fairgrounds. Today, our banking facility is maintained in one area where we perform central ticketing, coupon settlement, coupon sales and cash collecting as well as provides space for employee drug testing. The site is manned continuously by uniformed Dallas police officers that are able to monitor the building with closed circuit, tamper-resistant security cameras. The officers also restrict doorway access, keeping our workers and operators safe as they turn in money and coupons or receive checks.

At the 2008 State Fair, we'll introduce a new

payment system on the midway that will eliminate the need for our games operators to carry or count cash. Fairgoers will buy game cards from booths on the midway and games operators will scan those cards to deduct the cost of the game, similar to using a debit card. The cards can be replaced if lost by the fairgoer, and our games workers will find the system easy and quick, meaning they can spend more time attracting customers to their stalls.

Teamwork at the State Fair also extends far beyond our gates. The State Fair leases the fairgrounds known as Fair Park from the City of Dallas and we invest our net revenues in preserving the area's historic buildings and beauty.

Our officials work closely with members of Dallas' Park and Recreation Department to identify Fair Park improvement projects, and we help provide the resources and manpower for those improvements. Together, we've restored many of the murals on the area's art deco buildings, recreated some of the dramatic lighting from the fairground's 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition, and recovered many of the building's historic architecture.

A grand renovation of the famous Cotton Bowl is our latest partnership with the city and we believe the efforts will eventually benefit all citizens of Dallas. Home of the legendary Red River Rivalry football game between the University of Texas and the University of Oklahoma, the Cotton Bowl stadium is a true football landmark and holds a special place in the hearts of millions of fans. With a \$20-million investment from the fair and \$30 million from the city, the stadium is gaining 15,000 more seats this year along with renovated bathrooms, larger concessions areas, and walkways, a media room and gorgeous, high-definition scoreboard.

And with so much more razzle-dazzle to offer, the new-and-improved Cotton Bowl will draw even more tourists and football fans to our city, benefiting our local economy, businesses, and individuals. We see our investment in the stadium as an investment in our city and our fellow citizens.

While football great Vince Lombardi was most likely never a big Cotton Bowl fan, we'd like to believe he would applaud our efforts at the state fair nonetheless. As he once said, "Individual commitment to a group effort — that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work." ♦

Errol McKoy is the president of the State Fair of Texas.



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