



***Renovations ahead for vintage Santa Barbara venue.***

*by Joshua Molina - reprinted compliments of Noozhawk.com*

The Earl Warren Showgrounds board of directors on Thursday, Dec. 12, voted 8-0 to approve an equestrian facilities renovation plan that could bring world-class shows, competitions and events to Santa Barbara.

“It will not only improve the equestrian facilities, but it is going to improve the showgrounds as a whole,” said Ben Sprague, CEO of the Earl Warren Showgrounds.

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Geophysicist and horse rider Karen Christensen led a group representing several hundred community members interested in bringing the equestrian facilities into the modern era. Christensen is also working with the Santa Barbara Equine Assistance & Evac Team, a nonprofit organization that assists with large animal rescues during emergencies and disasters.

## January 2020 - Earl Warren Showgrounds

Written by by Joshua Molina - reprinted compliments of Noozhawk.com  
Tuesday, 31 December 2019 20:12

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The group plans to raise between \$600,000 and \$750,000 to fund a variety of changes for the first phase. Sprague said the showgrounds has four arenas, but they are in a state of disrepair. The plan, he said, is to combine two arenas into a larger facility, improving the footings, repair three of the horse barns, remove three other barns and create a lunging area for events. A new sound system also would be installed.

“It would begin the process of replacing the facility,” said Mike Medel, board president for the showgrounds. “It’s fixing up the basics so we can draw more of the horse shows. It also doesn’t jeopardize our vision of being a multiuse center.”

The showgrounds have been struggling financially for several years, but the facility has been turning around financially since the hiring of Sprague, who took over early last year. Sprague told Noozhawk that the projected end-of-year budget is stronger than initially anticipated by 10 percent. Sprague recently secured \$300,000 from the state of California in debt relief. In April, the facility had to take out a line of credit to cover payroll and operating costs.

He said there’s been a “false narrative” in the community about the showgrounds.

“We have made a lot of progress in a year,” Sprague said. “A lot of positive stuff has happened this year.”

Sprague said the facility might still need to take out a loan in the new year.

“We are not out of the woods, but we made a lot of progress in the last year,” Sprague said.

Christensen said she is thrilled with what lies ahead. Madison Square Garden in New York; Devon, PA, and the Earl Warren Showgrounds used to be the nation’s top three horse facility destinations. She said she is optimistic that those days will return, adding that everybody from various horse disciplines, such as english, rodeo, western and driving, are part of this “collaborative effort.”

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“This is a fantastic turning point,” Christensen told Noozhawk. “Earl Warren has lost its glamour, but we think we will have a horse show circuit and it will bring a lot of income to Santa Barbara. We are trying to rebuild it so that it is more multi-use, so the arenas that we are building can be used for movie nights, car shows, 4-H and car shows.”

The work is expected to be completed by April 15, Christensen said.

“Earl Warren is run by a group of volunteers,” she said. “It is owned by the state, and it has no money. Asking them to go fix it was never going to be the answer. The real idea was, as a horse community, understand what their needs are, how to work with them and develop the funding they needed.”