

State Fair Park improvements help Oklahoma City rake in cash

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Oklahoma City residents are seeing a healthy return on their investment thanks to continuing improvements and new buildings at State Fair Park, fair President and CEO Tim O'Toole told the city council Tuesday.

O'Toole presented an update to the council on the ongoing improvement projects to State Fair Park, and said the estimated economic impact in direct spending from events at the fairgrounds last year was \$353 million. The impact before the city approved implementing a hotel tax to pay for the improvements was estimated as \$275 million.

The tax paid for about \$2.5 million worth of improvements to the park in 2011 in the form of new fans and air conditioning for the 70,000-square-foot Cox Pavilion and Performance Arena and a new feed and bedding building near the horse barns.

The fans, which resemble airplane propellers more than typical ceiling fans because of their large size, and new air conditioning units help the circulation and climate control in what is the centerpiece venue for the lucrative horse shows the city attracts.

The feed and bedding building provides storage for the city for goods it can sell to horse and livestock owners, which was even more important this year because of the drought, O'Toole said.

“We stockpile hay and feed for our fall horse show customers when they're here,” O'Toole said. “We used to have to store about 30 percent of our inventory outside.”

Fair officials estimate more than 2.4 million people visited State Fair Park in 2010. The visitors accounted for about 241,000 nights in city hotel rooms and provided more than \$16 million in sales tax revenue.

Ward 1 City Councilman Gary Marrs noted how the visitors come from far and wide, bringing money from around the world into the local economy.

“We lose sight sometimes of how large the expanse (is) of how we affect people in the equine industry here in Oklahoma City,” he said.