

Dear Editor,

This letter is to help inform you and the community of some interesting developments related to the Ag Expo Center. While the project has been a source of significant economic progress, and perhaps more than a few questions, I hope this letter can help clarify what the next steps are.

In July 2020, the Ag Expo Center leadership announced a change in direction when Mr. Steven Craig entered into an agreement with the Ag Expo Center to purchase the present site where he will develop a specialty business park. This step retired all debt on the project and allows the Board of Directors to reevaluate its mission and vision.

In keeping with the mission of the project, and our core values to help educate area youth and spur economic development, the Board of Directors has begun exploring smaller-sized land locations. It is our hope that the location would help build upon the region's agricultural heritage and encourage more young people to stay in the region.

To help guide the next steps, a survey was distributed in late November 2020, with the goal of determining and gauging community interest in key areas related to the project. The goal of the survey was to gauge level of community interest in moving forward; define some key elements the community might be seeking; and help gauge willingness to support the project and other key informational areas.

Survey results included students from area schools who have an agricultural program, and the number of responses was determined to be statistically accurate to formulate answers to key questions. I'd like to share some of the key findings, and I hope you find them as interesting as we did.

When asked to gauge level of need for the Ag Expo Center, a little more than 80 percent said there's a high level of need; 15 percent said a medium level of need and only 6 percent said a low level of need.

When asked what elements the Ag Expo Center should include, 90 percent said a show arena/housing for livestock; second was ag related educational classrooms, at 85 percent. Just below that was FFA or 4-H related space, followed by a notable high response for rodeo arena, meeting space, farmers market and related spaces.

It may surprise some in the community that a space for collaboration with MU Extension was noted by 41 percent of respondents as an additional priority.

In terms of highest priority size/location criteria, the feature that received the highest level of number one priority was that the Ag Expo Center be near an educational institution. In a close second was that it be a smaller acreage, of less than 40 acres.

Perhaps of greatest interest is the high response of participants who said they would be willing to take part in the development of the center. When asked if they would be willing to help promote or tell others about the project, 46 percent said yes. In terms of volunteering, 43 percent said yes, they would be willing to volunteer at the Ag Expo Center. And 48 percent said they would be willing to help the project financially, if asked. These responses were also in line with several written comments about the project, including how important the respondents think it is for our community, and how it is worth the wait to make sure the right kind of Center is created on the right location.

These responses help solidify what we as a Board of Directors already know. The Ag Expo Center is a worthwhile endeavor, and although it's been a long journey, it's one that is definitely in the community's best interest to continue. In fact, the Board met in January for a special strategy session to review the survey results and ensure that our plans and goals were in alignment with the responses.

During the session, the Board agreed that based on survey results, the community itself is still expressing a continuing interest in such a facility. This interest is something different now with recent developments. We hope the community understands that the first location put us in a strong liquidity position – a position we did not have during the original location process.

There is still work to do to get people excited, but my fellow directors still get asked daily: When are you going to get something done on the project? (Demonstrating a strong interest). We all agree, some digging needs to be done re-kindle relationships with those who have supported Ag Expo in the past. We will work to regain their interest and support to become involved with the project as we search for a location that matches what the community is requesting. The survey shows we need this and we want this for our youth and our area.

We are also aware that there is a clear lack of knowledge by the community toward the changing field of agriculture and what it produces for us. We hope to improve the connection and the knowledge throughout this process, especially with St. Joseph remaining an ag industry leader.

As we move forward, we will keep to our original mission and utilize a new debt-free position to deliver the best outcome possible. We welcome and appreciate thoughts from our citizens as we look forward to the developments in the months to come.

Sincerely,
John Saunders,
Property Committee, Ag Expo Center Board of Directors
Former Director, Missouri Department of Agriculture