

# Calls to save Jeffco Fairgrounds get louder as county scrambles for a fix

A nonprofit group is proposing a partnership to save the county money



Photo by Kathryn Scott, The Denver Post

Colorado State Extension Jefferson County Master Gardener Barbara Larowe places radish seed in one of the raised garden beds next to beets and carrots at the Jefferson County Fairgrounds in 2017. On Tuesday, a large crowd attended the county commissioners meeting to plead for the future of the facility.

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PUBLISHED: February 25, 2020 at 3:39 p.m. | UPDATED: February 25, 2020 at 4:01 p.m.

Jefferson County’s elected leaders on Tuesday began the precarious task of threading a fiscal needle to keep its nearly 70-year-old county fairgrounds in operation, as the [reality of a budget crunch](#) crashed headlong into the impassioned pleas of dozens of residents who don’t want to see an important link to the area’s history erased.

“These are sacred lands to us,” said Ariana Sharp, a Lakewood resident who started riding horses at age 3. “My dream is to send my children to the fairgrounds.”

Sharp was one of more than 100 residents who crowded into the commissioner hearing room for more than four hours Tuesday to share ideas on how to save the Jefferson County Fairgrounds from the chopping block. The county has considered ending fairgrounds operations as it tackles a \$12 million budget shortfall in 2021.

Many of those who spoke Tuesday said the fairgrounds and the programs it offers — from the 4-H Club to the Westernaires to the Jeffco High School Rodeo Team — provide a vital cultural bridge to an equine and agricultural-focused world that is part and parcel of the county’s history.

“Losing the fairgrounds will increase the urban/rural divide even more,” said Robin Driggers, a Morrison resident who recently helped found the nonprofit group [Friends of Jeffco Fairgrounds](#) to act as a potential partner to the county in shouldering some of the \$1.8 million in annual costs to run the 100-acre facility in Golden.

Others cited the fairgrounds' longtime role as an evacuation site for large animals during wildfires and floods as reason to keep it going. Resident Andrea Raschke said there is no alternative site for horses and livestock during emergencies.

"It's one thing to pack a gymnasium with people — it's another to house a large assortment of animals," she said.

County Manager Don Davis ended the meeting on a hopeful note, with a plan built around maintaining "critical portions" of the fairgrounds that could save the county \$1 million to \$1.6 million. That would allow youth, equine and agricultural groups to continue holding their events at the fairgrounds while at the same time exploring a possible partnership with an outside group to operate the site on a day-to-day basis.

Fees may have to increase and there's even an option to close the fairgrounds one day a week to save money.

"We believe that's a viable path forward to preserve these activities at the Jeffco Fairgrounds," Davis said.

The question about the fairgrounds' future arose last month as the county began to wrestle with the reality of a budget shortfall since [voters in Jefferson County rejected a ballot measure last November](#) that would have allowed the county to keep revenues beyond what the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights allows.

The sheriff's department has [been releasing some jail inmates early](#) after budget cuts were imposed, and the jail [closed its seventh floor on Jan. 1](#), which reduced the number of available beds from 1,392 to 1,148.

"It's really important to know how we got here," said Commissioner Lesley Dahlkemper, who noted that Jefferson County is one of the only counties in the state that hasn't passed a measure to de-Bruce. "If we had voter permission to tap into \$12 million (in excess TABOR funds), we could address the budget issues today. While other counties are investing in transportation and programs for kids, we're looking at cutting \$12.5 million."

But Golden resident Jennison Perry told the commissioners that he has only seen increases in his property taxes in recent years.

"When I see my property tax go up \$3,000 over six years, that money is going somewhere," he said. The county will continue discussions on the future of the fairgrounds as it approaches its next budget cycle this fall. In an interview before the meeting, Lisa Slavig said Friends of Jeffco Fairgrounds plans to unveil a plan next month on how to take over operations at the fairgrounds through a public-private partnership with the county.