

Watsonville Band leader says county fair out of step

By JAMIE MARKS
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — The director of the Watsonville Band is threatening to pull his groups' food stand out of the Santa Cruz County Fair over a dispute about escalating costs and ever-tightening health codes.

"It's a very difficult position I'm in because I've promoted the fair for so many years, and also because there's a new person in charge," said Ed Pio, the band's volunteer director.

But Pio said he decided to make public his complaints about the changes being implemented by new Fair Director Ron Haedicke and the tight restrictions of the county Health Department. He said they don't appreciate the efforts of community-based volunteer groups like his.

"Our purpose for being is the community," Pio said, "but if they (the fair and government) don't

begin to treat us like the volunteer non-profit organization we are, they're going to kill volunteerism."

Pio and Haedicke are attempting to reach a compromise that will see the band's well-known fried artichoke trailer return. Haedicke invited Pio to a meeting of the fair committee Tuesday morning, where the committee tentatively offered to review several issues.

Whether the Watsonville Band returns to the fair depends on what the fair board adopts at its July 11 meeting, Pio said.

Pio's list of complaints begins with the increase in the percentage of profits food booths will have to pay the fair. This year, the rate went up from 20 percent to 22 percent.

The band paid \$3,957.37 to the fair in 1988, compared with \$975 to the Gilroy Garlic Festival. Pio said the band grossed almost \$5,000 more at the Garlic Festival — and worked

shorter hours.

"What did we get for the \$3,000 more that we paid the fair? Nothing except many more hours of hard work and less money for our efforts," Pio said in one of two letters to Haedicke.

Pio has proposed a formula to have the fair charge non-profit groups 22 percent on gross receipts up to \$5,000, 18 percent on the next \$5,000, 15 percent on the next \$5,000, and 12 percent on anything over \$15,000. For-profit groups would pay a flat rate of 22 percent.

Haedicke said the fair committee has agreed to review the rate increase.

"We're not trying to set rates that prohibit non-profits from participating in this community event," Haedicke said. But, unlike the Garlic Festival, which leases property for its three-day run, the fairgrounds is open year-round and needs revenue to cover its over-

head, he said.

The fair went over its budget by \$180,000 in 1988, forcing it to dip into reserves to cover unexpected costs and a shortfall in revenues, Haedicke said. Some of the new regulations are an attempt to get the budget back in line.

Pio was also upset by the new policy on passes, which allows only four passes per shift per food concession. The band's food stand needs as many as 35 people to staff it at peak times, he said.

Haedicke said he reviewed the new policy Tuesday and realized it was more restrictive than he had intended. He has offered to give extra passes to the band and two other non-profit groups that have requested them, and added that the fair committee is looking into revising the new policy.

But, Haedicke said, the fair needs to tighten its policy about free passes. Other county fairs see an average of 80 percent of their attendance coming from paid admission and 20 percent from passes, while Santa Cruz County Fair attendance is split 60-40, paid to unpaid.

"It's always tough the first year when passes are restricted," Haedicke said. "But it's a problem we've got to deal with."

A stricter auditing program on food sales will be instituted this year, but Haedicke said he's agreed to drop a plan to require non-profits to make all sales through a cash register after discovering registers would cost up to \$100 each

to rent.

Another issue that upset Pio was county health regulations. Surrounding counties exempt non-profits from having to meet restaurant regulations on food preparation, but not Santa Cruz County, which has a stricter ordinance for events that run longer than one day.

Haedicke said he has no control over the Health Department, but added he was surprised at the tight requirements, as state law specifi-

cally allows fairs and other events an exemption.

"To take the Santa Cruz County Fair on is not entirely fair," said Haedicke, of Pio's complaints. "I'm not saying the man doesn't have some good points, but some of them I don't have any control over."

Pio said he'd "love to be at the fair, but not under the current conditions." However, if a compromise is reached with the full board, the fried artichoke booth may return, after all.

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