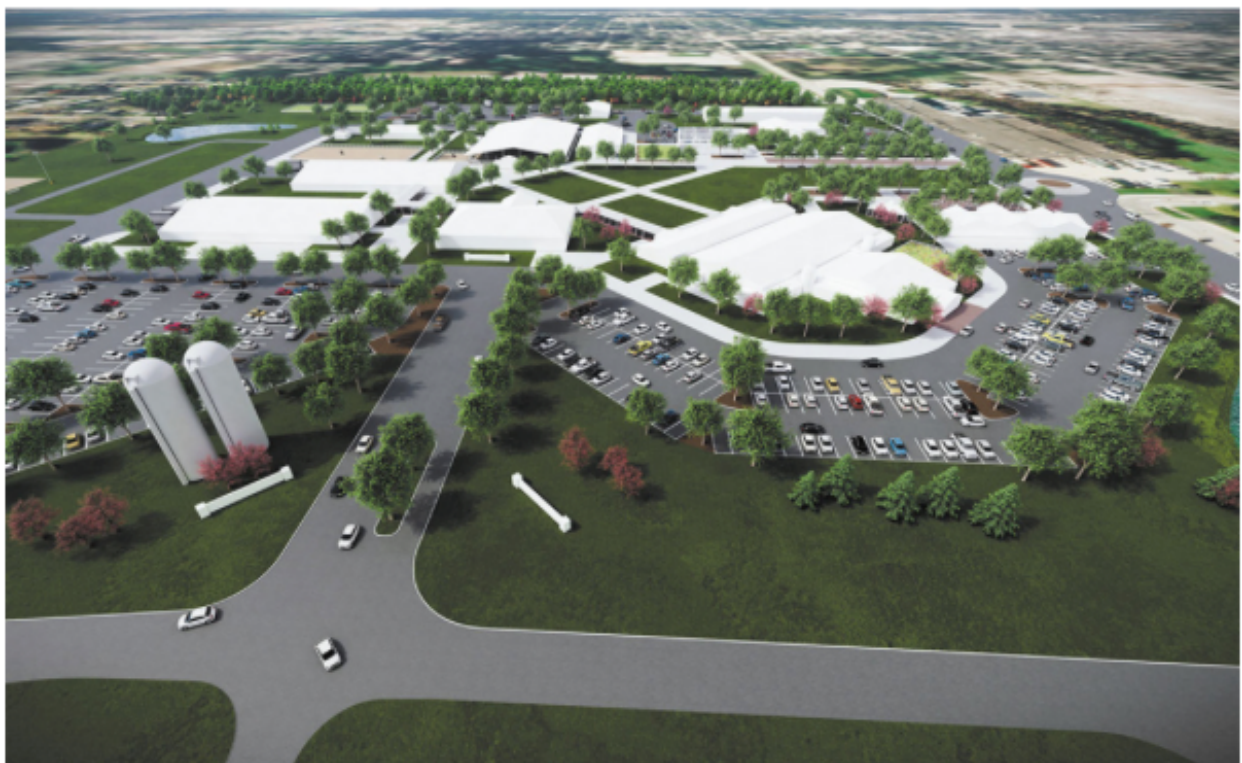


Hamilton County hopes fairgrounds expansion leads to more programming

June 2, 2023 | [Daniel Bradley](#)

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A rendering of the full project includes the silos planned for phase two at the Clover Street entrance. (Renderings courtesy of Mussett Nicholas Associates)

It's been a quarter-century since the Hamilton County 4-H Fairgrounds received any new investment.

That will change this summer when a \$65 million, three-phase expansion project begins that will modernize the 40-acre site in Noblesville and enable it to host a wider variety of programming throughout the year.

The project is expected to take nearly 50,000 square feet of existing outdoor and non-air-conditioned space and convert it into air-conditioned buildings that could be used year-round.

"This is really going to open the floodgates on being able to use this for rental facilities and more community activity," Hamilton County Commissioner Mark Heirbrandt said.

The first phase of construction at the site east of State Road 37 in the 1900 block of Pleasant Street will cost \$26.5 million. The Hamilton County Council last year approved \$15 million for the first phase, while the remaining \$11.5 million will be raised by the Hamilton County Extension Board.

The board is planning a \$50 million capital campaign for the entire project that will launch this summer.

Construction is expected to begin following the Hamilton County 4-H Fair, scheduled to run July 20-24.

In May, the Hamilton County commissioners approved a build-operate-transfer agreement for the first phase of construction with Fishers-based construction company The Hagerman Group. That type of arrangement—which was authorized by a 2017 state law—is a form of public-private partnership that shifts the burden of cost overruns to a developer.

The initial phase will include construction of the 8,000-square-foot Bicentennial Pavilion, a show arena and a maintenance barn, along with renovations to the existing exhibition center. Workers will also improve drainage at the site, which has long been a concern.

The new buildings will be the first constructed at the fairgrounds since 1997.

"Our vision of this started as what would be something that's going to be usable in the future for years down the road in meeting our programming needs, meeting community needs as far as how it's used now and what the renters want," Purdue Extension Hamilton County Director Susan Peterson said.

The Bicentennial Pavilion will be the fairgrounds' showcase building and is expected to host wedding receptions, conferences and other large gatherings. It is scheduled to open late next year.

“We wanted to ... create something they could be proud of, and we’re doing it in true public-works fashion,” said John Jackson III, director of architecture at Indianapolis-based Mussett Nicholas Associates. “We’re trying to make sure that this building remains in great condition 30, 40, 50 years down the road. So, it does cost a little bit of money up front to construct the long-term building like that, but that’s the goal in mind here.”

The new pavilion will replace the need for two existing buildings—the O.V. Winks Building and an annex—that hold rental space at the fairgrounds.

Those buildings will be demolished later this year to make way for Noblesville’s \$113 million Reimagine Pleasant Street project. The road expansion will create a major east-west connector through the city to help travelers bypass downtown traffic.

Seven other buildings will be demolished as well, according to a master plan developed by Mussett Nicholas Associates that the fairgrounds released last year. Eight buildings will be constructed over the three phases.

The county has not established a timeline for the second and third phases, which are contingent on funding. The master plan estimates that they’ll cost \$15.5 million and \$22 million.

The second phase is to include the construction of two silos at the main entrance to the fairgrounds off Clover Road. The fairgrounds would then be rebranded as The Silos@37 Hamilton County 4-H Fairgrounds and Events Center.

Heirbrandt said the project is complex but important.

“It’s just a mixed bag of what we’re having to deal with,” he said. “We’re having to deal with losing those buildings. We’re having to deal with [the fact] that we haven’t invested any money in the facilities for [25-plus years], and then the technology has changed, and we want to be able to offer a lot more educational programs and things for people in our community and have a space people want to come to and they want to be able to use.”

Mussett Nicholas Associates has worked on about a dozen county fairground projects across Indiana, including in Hendricks and Shelby counties.

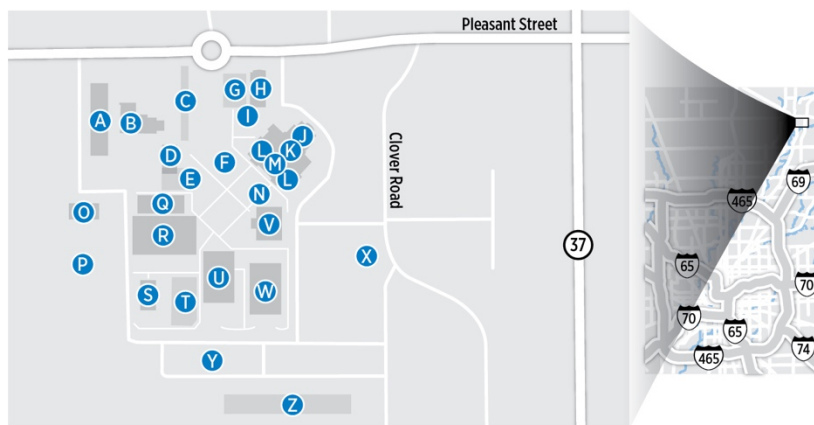
Jackson said three goals for the Hamilton County project are to create a pedestrian-friendly and safe environment for the fair and other events, convert buildings from seasonal outdoor barns used four months of the year to year-round structures, and create a site where multiple events can take place simultaneously without impacting one another.

“The Indiana Convention Center and Indiana State Fairgrounds continue to fill up with larger events, pushing out small- and medium-sized events,” Jackson said.

“The private sector has kept up with the demand for high-end, high-cost spaces,” he said, “but lower-cost spaces that don’t need the high-style flair are harder to find, especially with a square footage of over 20,000 square feet.”

Hamilton County Fairgrounds plan

Hamilton County is planning a \$65 million expansion of its fairgrounds in Noblesville. The three-phase project will involve demolishing nine buildings and constructing eight, renovating some current facilities, and reworking most of the site’s drainage, utilities, traffic flow and parking. Construction on phase one is expected to begin following this year’s Hamilton County Fair. Below is the full renovation plan. Hamilton County is planning a \$65 million expansion of its fairgrounds in Noblesville. The three-phase project will involve demolishing nine buildings and constructing eight, renovating some current facilities, and reworking most of the site’s drainage, utilities, traffic flow and parking. Construction on phase one is expected to begin following this year’s Hamilton County Fair. Below is the full renovation plan.



- A Household hazardous waste
- B Soil & water—weights office
- C Vendor plaza
- D Greenhouse
- E Master show garden
- F Central green
- G Bicentennial gardens
- H Bicentennial pavilion
- I Centennial pavilion
- J Purdue extension—four offices
- K Exhibition center halls A-B-C
- L Exhibition expansion
- M Exhibition kitchen and dining
- N Covered walkway
- O Maintenance & storage barn
- P Trailer parking
- Q Llama barn
- R Equestrian arena
- S Horse barn
- T Makeup arena
- U Sheep & small animal building
- V Show arena
- W Cattle & swine building
- X Silos

Source: Mussett Nicholas Associates, © Mapcreator.io | OSM.org | © MapTiler

A modern fairground

The expansion project, if completed according to the master plan, would result in a 300% increase in year-round rental space and more than double the number of rooms for lease. It would also increase the number of possible simultaneous rental events on-site from three to at least five.

According to data provided by Hamilton County Tourism Inc., 75% of fairgrounds visitors live within 30 miles of the site.

Hamilton County Tourism CEO Brenda Myers said the new and improved facilities present a growth opportunity and a chance to fill more hotel rooms with visitors attending weddings, consumer shows and educational events.

“There’s no doubt that the added space and the improved space is going to make it a very marketable commodity,” Myers said.

County and fair officials gave some thought to moving the fairgrounds from the spot that has been its home since 1950. They considered sites in Noblesville and Westfield but decided to stay in place and develop a modern fairground.

2023 county fair schedules

Hancock: June 23-30

Morgan: July 7-15

Hendricks: July 16-22

Hamilton: July 20-24

Marion: June 30-July 9

Boone: July 15-21

Johnson: July 16-22

Shelby: July 23-29

Source: IBJ research

Hamilton County Extension Board President Jane Sipe said the board's Life Sciences Committee, which was formed to study the county's fairground needs, visited updated county fairgrounds in Boone and Hendricks counties, along with Conner Prairie and an events center in Lawrenceburg.

"We learned a lot," Sipes said. "And then once we got through that, we developed our design team and started looking at buildings and facilities."

She said the updated fairgrounds will allow Hamilton County to attract events that do not fit at larger venues like the Indiana State Fairgrounds, including vendor events that have stayed away from the county due to a lack of space in Noblesville.

The Hamilton County Fairgrounds currently hosts up to 1,000 events per year, including Ag Days (a three-day event that attracts thousands of children), a holiday giveaway event that draws up to 10,000 vehicles in one day, plant sales and Election Day voting. It was also a major COVID-19 vaccination site, and it is used for training by the Hamilton County Sheriff's Office and Hamilton County Emergency Management.

"It's also a community meeting space," Hamilton County Council member Sue Maki said. "It's much more than just that 4-H Fair that's in the summer. It's used year-round by so many different organizations and businesses ... so it is very much a key community kind of gathering spot of our social infrastructure for our county."
