

Palace, Fox owners vie for Meadow Brook

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

Talks aimed at privatizing the financially strapped Meadow Brook Music Festival at Oakland University are approaching the serious stage, with two prominent southeastern Michigan promoters vying with each other for the contract.

Arena Associates Inc., operators of the Palace of Auburn Hills and the New Pine Knob, and Olympia Arenas Inc., which runs the Fox Theatre and the Joe Lewis Arena, are negotiating with OU for the contract to run the popular but fiscally unbound summer series.

"We are in the discussion phase," said OU interim president John H. De Carlo. "We want to determine if it's viable to have a promoter operate the festival under terms, conditions and requirements established by the university to maintain quality programming."

"But one thing is very important,"

De Carlo said. "The music festival will continue to be an integral part of Oakland University."

The Meadow Brook Music Festival is currently operated by OU on the school's east campus in Rochester. It has been the summer home of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra since 1964 and the site of popular concerts since 1970.

BUT THE SERIES has fallen on financial hard times over the last decade or so because of a number of factors such as increased competition and bad weather.

As of last February — when OU turned over seven concerts to Cellar Door Productions — the festival's accumulated deficit was \$921,717.

Turning over the concerts to Cellar Door wasn't anything new, said De Carlo, who noted that OU had previously contracted with other promoters on a limited scale.

But it might have been a hint of things to come.

'I don't know that the university should be in the business of running a music festival.'

— Andrea L. Fisher
OU trustee

Last summer, the festival featured 45 concerts — 15 fewer than in 1990 — featuring a wide range of artists, including Victor Borge, the Boston Pops Orchestra, Smoky Robinson, Morrissey and Indigo Girls.

Many were sell-outs, said Frank Cardimen, assistant to the OU vice president for external affairs. "It was a very successful season."

"I can't speak for Cellar Door, but I understand those seven concerts were among the most successful."

Even so, the series "didn't quite

break even," Cardimen said.

With last summer fresh in their minds, OU officials this month are expected to discuss turning over more if not all of the concerts to private promoters, according to De Carlo. The Board of Trustees will likely address the idea early next year.

TRUSTEES, HOWEVER, are already thinking about the problem, and weighing the options. OU contacted several promoters, but they have narrowed the prospects to two,

Arena Associates and Olympia Arenas.

"We are only in the discussion stages," said trustee James A. Sharp Jr. of Detroit. "But the idea deserves consideration. In a competitive area like this one, we (OU) are just not geared up to compete with the people who run the Palace or the Fox Theatre."

Another trustee, Andrea L. Fisher of Birmingham, summarized her thoughts this way. "I don't know that the university should be in the business of running a music festival."

"If we put it in the hands of professionals, the university wins all the way around. We get the benefits of professional promotion and we get the benefits of any improvements the contractor might make . . . and we make money regardless of rainy weather or poor attendance."

Trustee L. Brooks Patterson of Drayton Plains said discussion on contracting out the festival is long overdue. "OU is a great university, but a lousy promoter," he said. "The sooner we move to privatize the festival, the better."

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