

# New Meadow Brook pact to bring changes

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STAFF WRITER

With the recent acquisition of Oakland University's Meadow Brook Music Festival, the Auburn Hills-based Arena Associates now stands to be more competitive in the already-crowded Detroit music market.

President Thomas Wilson doesn't see Meadow Brook and his company's two other properties, The Palace of Auburn Hills and Pine Knob Music Theatre, as competing with each other, however.

"Although Pine Knob and Meadow Brook are outdoor amphitheaters operating during the same season, we see a complementary — not a competitive — situation," Wilson said.

"With the increased popularity of outdoor tours during the summer months, having two facilities gives us the flexibility to provide the appropriate size facility for a show as well as offer more entertainment during the time of year people want to enjoy the Michigan outdoors."

The move will allow the organization to develop a variety of acts, he said. At a 7,500-seat capacity, the woody Meadow Brook stands nearly half the size of Pine Knob and a third of The Palace's seating.

The university's board of trustees voted Thursday, March 3, to approve the organization's bid to operate and manage Meadow Brook beginning this summer. Former managers Brass Ring Productions and Olympia Arenas

Inc., which books shows into and runs Detroit's Fox Theatre, Joe Louis Arena and Cobo Arena, "chose not to renew their contract under the existing conditions of the agreement," said Paul Bissonette, Oakland University's vice president for finance and administration.

Brass Ring and Olympia Arenas, who had run the venue since 1992, refused to comment referring all call to Oakland University officials.

## Other business

University President Sandra Packard said every attempt was made to hammer out an agreement with the Livonia-based Brass Ring and Detroit's Olympia Arenas.

"We have gone out of our way to get them to stay on, but they had other business decisions that they had to make," Packard told the trustees at its meeting.

The move will allow Arena Associates more leverage in booking shows, Wilson said.

"It will be fun because, first of all, it's a wonderful place to watch shows. It's a great niche for us because we can go to artists or managers and sort of say, 'In this stage of your artist development where do you see them playing a small amphitheater... or a bigger amphitheater?'"

Arena Associates will be responsible for all event bookings, marketing, group sales, public relations, parking, security and ground maintenance for the festival.

## Turnaround

Before Brass Ring and Olympia Arenas began operating the venues in 1992, Meadow Brook had been operating on a \$1.5 million deficit. Meadow Brook has been on the upswing financially since then; however, last year longtime summer tenants the Detroit Symphony Orchestra moved its shows to Greenfield Village in Dearborn.

Despite that, Arena Associates' Wilson said with Meadow Brook he hopes to duplicate the success he has had with The Palace and Pine Knob.

Since its opening in 1988, The Palace has been voted "Arena of the Year" by Performance magazine and twice by Pollstar magazine. The group took over Pine Knob 3½ years ago, put \$12 million in improvements into the amphitheater. It has become the nation's highest grossing and most attended amphitheater.

"We will put improvements into it and program it and book it and breathe a lot of life back into it like we did up north," he said, comparing Meadow Brook to Pine Knob.

Concert-goers will not see too many major improvements this year, however. Because Arena Associates got involved so close to the summer season, the changes will be aesthetic, he said.

"This year it will mostly be cosmetic things that we would do with landscaping. Hopefully we can improve the concession situation."

tion. We're coming in so late that it's almost impossible to do anything else," Wilson said.

When his organization begins the planning of major renovations, Wilson said they are going to consider the problems that ticket-holders once encountered with Pine Knob.

"We're going to address the things that were of a concern to people when we took over Pine Knob. You couldn't get there, you couldn't get out, you couldn't go to the bathroom, you couldn't eat. Other than that, it was 'nice show.'"

## Programming mix

One thing that will remain is

the type of acts that are booked into Meadow Brook which has ranged from pianist/composer Marvin Hamlisch to British pop star Morrissey.

"We foresee keeping many of the traditional types of shows that have become Meadow Brook staples — children's shows, jazz, classical concerts, rock 'n' roll reviews and cutting edge-type new music — but we certainly won't limit ourselves strictly to what has worked in the past," said Jim McCue, director of events for The Palace and Pine Knob.

Not everyone is thrilled about the transaction, however. Employees of Meadow Brook, who belong to the Theatrical Stage Employees' Local 38, are concerned that the agreement will

leave them out in the cold. The Palace and Pine Knob have been subject to protests because Arena Associates' established them as non-union venues.

"The Palace and Pine Knob are non-union organizations. It's our feeling that we're going to be left behind," said Tim McGee, business representative for Meadow Brook Music Festival employees, at the Board of Trustees meeting.

"We hope that the 30 years of loyalty that our people have shown to Oakland University... will be taken into consideration."

Arena Associates has not yet made a decision about the future of Meadow Brook's employees. Although Wilson did say that he hopes to offer employment to Oakland University students.



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