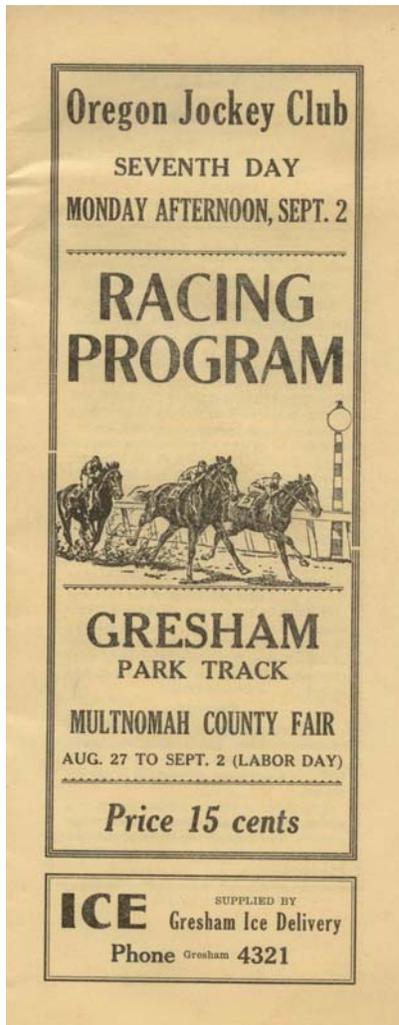


# Portland Exposition Center Administrative History

## Summary

The Portland Exposition Center was the result of the 1969 merger of two distinct recreational traditions—the County Fair and the Pacific International Livestock Exposition (commonly called the PI). Multnomah County divested both programs in 1994. The Exposition Center was transferred to Metro and the County Fair was transferred to a citizen Fair Advisory Board.



## County Fair (1907-1965)

The Multnomah County Fair began as a grange fair in the late nineteenth century. Several Multnomah County Granges, led by Pomona Grange, cooperated to hold the fair. In 1907, all Multnomah and Clackamas County granges agreed to help promote the grange fair in Multnomah County. Between 1907 and 1912, a committee of three granges obtained a fifty-acre site in Gresham, built a fair office and a restaurant, and managed the annual fair.

In 1912, a County Fair Association was formed to manage the grange fair which was renamed the Multnomah County Fair. In 1929, the county fairgrounds were transferred to Multnomah County ownership because of a tax delinquency foreclosure. The association continued to manage the annual county fair until the early 1950's, when the county claimed that the association was mismanaging fair funds. The resulting court action required a joint county-association management team to oversee the fair.

At the same time, the County Fair began looking for a new location. The City of Gresham was interested in developing the fairgrounds and the county was interested in siting the fair at a location that could accommodate a year-round exposition center. In 1954, the County Commissioners asked the County Planning Commission to study possible new sites for the fair. The proposal included a 186-acre site in the Delta Park area incorporating PI and the Portland Meadows racetrack. In 1960, the county took over management of the fair. The Multnomah County Fair was managed by the Board of Commissioners since Multnomah County is the only county in Oregon that has a large enough population to allow it to bypass statutory requirements for a Fair Board. A county fair development fund – consisting of \$1.2 million dollars transferred from the general – was established for the purpose of acquiring and building a new county fair facility.

## Pacific International Livestock Exposition (1918-1965)

The Pacific International Livestock Exposition (PI) was one of five major livestock shows in the United States. It started in 1910 as a beef cattle show to promote the business of the North Portland Stockyards and by 1918 had incorporated as a livestock exhibition. The original exhibition buildings were erected in 1921-1922 at the Delta Park area site. They were burned in their entirety in 1925, but were quickly rebuilt. The PI or Expo Center, as it was also called, provided the facilities for grading of breeds to strict standards, awarding of prizes, conducting auctions, and sponsorship of first-class rodeos. The PI received financial support from the state legislature equal to that of the county fair, including a portion of pari-mutuel racing revenues.

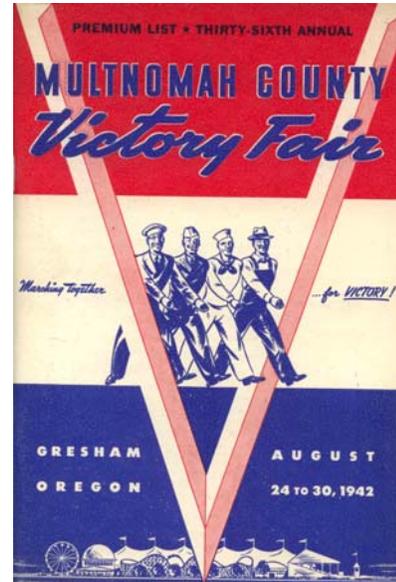
PI buildings were used as a detention center for 3500 Japanese Americans during five months of 1942. The Expo Center was known as the “Portland Assembly Center” and served as a staging center for the internees’ relocation to Hunt, Idaho facilities. The Expo Center later served as the site of the Oregon Centennial celebration in 1959-60.

### **Portland Exposition Center (1965-1994)**

In 1965, two things happened which had a major impact on fair and exposition operations. First, the county commissioned a study to determine the possibility of incorporating trade shows as a use of the grounds at the county fair. The report, *Multnomah County Fair and Exposition*, supported such a use and also discussed the incorporation of the Pacific International (PI) livestock building into the exposition center facilities, showing a \$10 million all-year fair with a permanent amusement park, parking, exposition and exhibit halls, restaurants, and 24 acres of parking.

Second, PI requested financial assistance from the state legislature. The legislature awarded them a \$250,000 loan. The conditions of the loan included a requirement that PI turn over its facilities to Multnomah County. The County Commissioners, who had been lobbying for an exposition site, decided that a combined Fair and Exposition made the most sense and that the PI site was the best location for it. In 1966, the County Commissioners voted to consolidate the County Fair and the Expo. All equipment, staff, and whatever buildings could be moved were relocated from the county fairgrounds in Gresham to the new site in northeast Multnomah County in 1969. The 1970 County Fair was the first one held at the new site.

The emphasis on the Expo Center gradually shifted from the annual County Fair to consumer/trade shows and Portland Meadows Racetrack. In 1970, the Fair Development Fund was abolished and fair profits were transferred to the county general fund. By 1984, Exposition profits had outpaced fair profits. County Fair supporters claimed that fair revenues could only be used for the county fair, but this argument was undermined by an Attorney General’s opinion in 1985. The fair went from a twelve-day event in 1970 to a five-day event in 1993.



In 1979, the rodeo arena and livestock barns were demolished. The PI was forced to hold its annual 1980 and 1981 expositions in rented tents. The county built a replacement barn in 1980, but its space was limited and required the PI to use tents in 1982 and 1983 for additional space. In 1982, the county removed permanent seating in the arena to make room for trade shows. By 1984, PI had eliminated horse shows.

By 1993, the county considered discontinuing the Multnomah County Fair. It had already allowed the private nonprofit group, Friends of the Multnomah County Fair, Inc., to produce the 1992 and 1993 fairs. As a result of public opposition, it formed a County Fair Task Force to propose a plan for the 1993 fair and to make recommendations on the future of the County Fair. This was done with the understanding that the county was already considering the transfer of the Portland Expo Center, county parks, and county golf courses to Metro.

The Task Force recommended the formation of a Fair Board to produce and manage the 1994 County Fair with the help of the Friends of the Multnomah County Fair. It also recommended the formation of a permanent citizen board to oversee each annual fair.

With the transfer of the County Fair to this board in 1994 and the transfer of the Expo Center to Metro in the same year, the county had completed its involvement in these functions.

**Sources:**

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