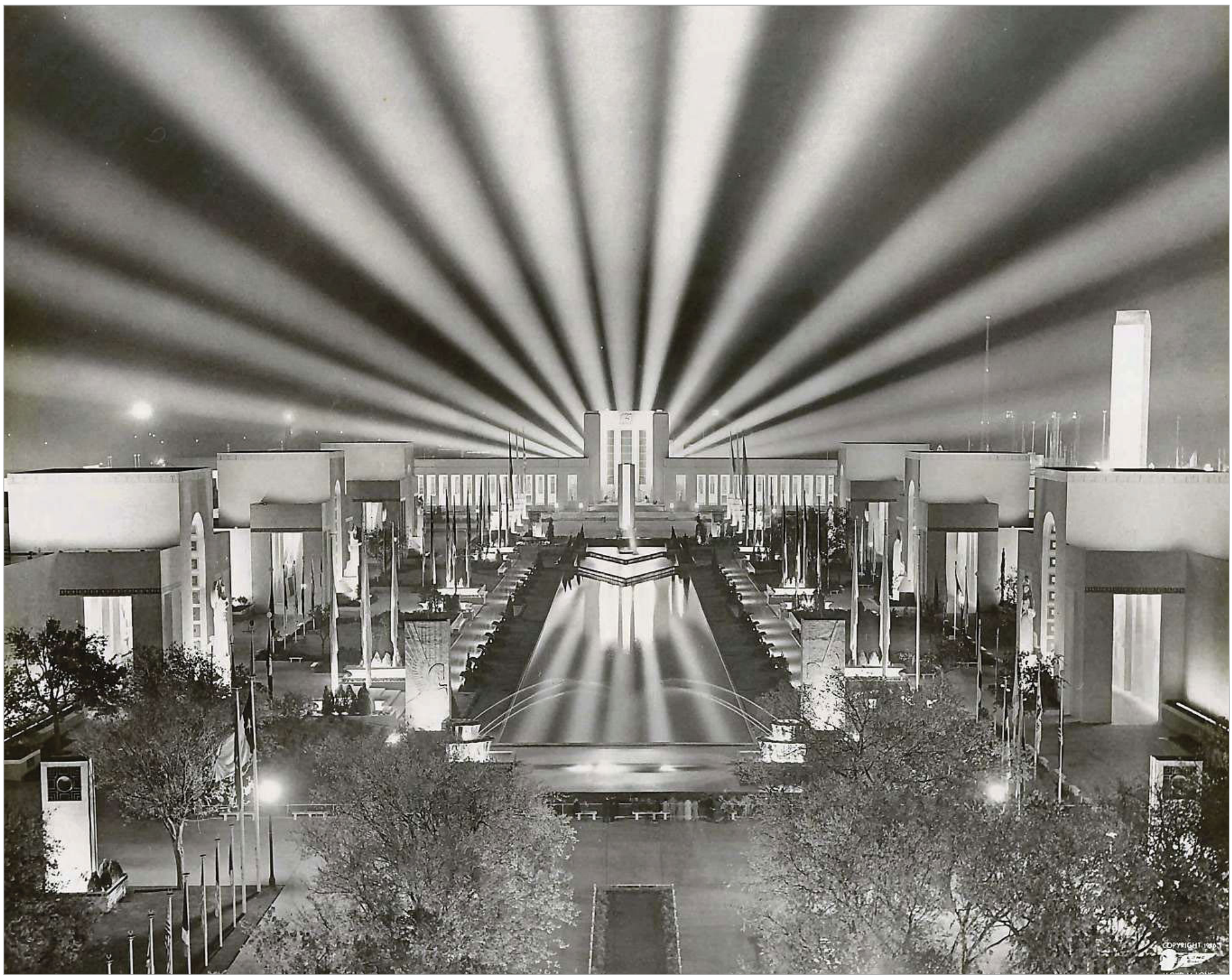


State Fair of Texas

A photograph of Fair Park taken during the 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition.

EDITORIAL

WE CAN STILL SAVE FAIR PARK. HERE'S HOW

We offer seven pillars for a path forward for Dallas' most important asset

There is a magical image of Fair Park that has become an icon of Dallas.

Taken after dark during the 1936 Texas Centennial Exposition, it shows beams of bright light shooting over the Hall of State and reflecting off the Esplanade Fountain, illuminating the symmetry of the Centennial and Automobile buildings and the sentinel statuary of six giant women representing Texas' past.

Obscured behind the light is the Cotton Bowl, and, farther still, the fairgrounds that make up a mystery Dallas cannot seem to solve.

The image speaks of a brash young city that saw itself in Fair Park's glow, prosperous and certain it would take its place in the world.

Nearly 100 years later, Dallas has realized something of what the image conveyed. The city is wealthy beyond the wildest dreams of 1936.

But something is lost, too, some sense of the possibility of a beautiful, ordered city honoring the past in the light of the future.

"To me, Fair Park was a magical place, a beautiful park with incredible things to see and experience," the late preservationist Virginia Savage McAlester says in the introduction to *Fair Park Deco*.

She recalled visiting with her mother as a girl, back when Fair Park was a culture and arts hub that drew people from all over the city: "Sometimes the two of us would just walk around the park and look at the amazing buildings."

Everywhere there was some wonder, from the Tower Building's golden eagle to strange exhibits like "Invisible Man and Woman" in the health museum.

Too few of us today could form memories like McAlester's. For all the effort, our city cannot get Fair Park right. As we falter, this piece of our past is struggling.

In recent weeks, we have examined what happened to a 2018 private management plan that many hoped would spell success for Fair Park.

The collapse of that deal among the city of Dallas, the nonprofit Fair Park First and the private management firm Oak View Group could become a generational setback.

That cannot be allowed to happen. It would be a historical error in a city that has already ripped down too much of its past.

In hopes of reinvigorating support for Fair Park, we are laying out seven pillars we hope will begin a serious conversation about moving forward.

We don't pretend to have the answer. There won't be one answer.

We do believe these pillars can set the foundation to sustain Fair Park and set it up to succeed as the place McAlester remembered, in a time when Dallas believed not only in its wealth but in its potential for beauty and greater meaning.



In the final editorial in this series, we make recommendations on a path forward for Fair Park.

See **FAIR PARK** Page 2P

WHAT THEY SAID

"It's for those who came before me and ran countless yards so I could come in and score a touchdown. ... This is for my people, my culture, and our history. Ve y **dile a tu abuela, que seremos el HALFTIME SHOW DEL SUPER BOWL**." *— Bad Bunny, in a statement, announcing he will be headlining the Super Bowl's halftime show (Monday, The New York Times)*



"**My husband Miguel was a good man, a loving father, and the provider for our family.** ... I do not know how to explain to our children that their father is gone." *— Stephany Gauffeny, widow of Miguel Ángel García Medina, who was shot during an attack on the ICE office in Dallas. García, a Mexican man, had been detained by ICE officials. (Tuesday, The Associated Press)*

"Dr. Goodall's discoveries as an ethologist revolutionized science, and **she was a tireless advocate for the protection and restoration of our natural world**." *— A statement in social media from the Jane Goodall Institute announcing her death. (Wednesday, Reuters)*



"It is my strong personal opinion that our **City Hall is functionally obsolete and well beyond its useful life**." *— Dallas developer Shawn Todd, talking about the debate over whether to repair the aging landmark or demolish it and use the land for another purpose. (Wednesday, The Dallas Morning News)*



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Fair Park

Continued from Page 1P



File Photos/The Dallas Morning News

Fairgoers enjoyed the State Fair of Texas in 2024. The State Fair is the most generous and consistent tenant that Fair Park likely ever will have, and it would be to Fair Park's benefit to make the most of that relationship.



An artist's rendering of the community park planned for Fair Park, pictured at its unveiling in December. It would be a good idea to complete this project, writes the editorial board.

Pillar 1: Greater support from City Hall

The city has invested hundreds of millions in Fair Park through bond programs and the annual budget. The promise of additional funding from a share of the tax revenue set aside for the new convention center will help offset some decline in the major historical buildings.

More is needed. And unless the city increases its annual budget for maintenance and operations at Fair Park, decline will continue.

Words are cheap; dollars aren't. The council and management must acknowledge through the budget that Fair Park is the city's most important physical asset. Some of that has begun with $2.5 million in additional funding this year. That is an important start, but only a start.

We tried the cheap answer in 2018, when the city turned Fair Park over to Spectra (later OVG) and Fair Park First. Spectra's low bid to run Fair Park was a fantasy.

Former Hunt Oil CEO Walt Humann spent years understanding the real cost of operating and maintaining Fair Park. A bid he put together in 2017 came up short, in large part because it would have cost the city so much more money than what Spectra proposed.

Speaking to us, Humann was clear that until the city shows it will pay what Fair Park is worth, philanthropic dollars won't be forthcoming.

"You're going to have to ante up more money," he said. "It's not a situation where miraculously someone is going to pop $100 million down and say, 'I'm going to help Fair Park.' Just the opposite. They're going to look to the city."

Don Glendenning, a Dallas civic leader who led the successful effort to privatize the Dallas Zoo's management, told us something similar: "The most important element was to establish some level of city support as the base that respected donors would view as a reasonable city commitment."

If the city doesn't substantially increase funding to Fair Park, Dallas' philanthropic community won't step forward. Period.

We say this knowing that additional resources for Fair Park must come from elsewhere in the city budget. That is the affirmative statement from City Hall we need: Fair Park is a budget priority because it represents our past and our opportunity.

Pillar 2: A civic champion to create or rebuild a nonprofit

It's true that people don't give big money to causes; they give it to people they trust.

Fair Park needs a champion or champions who not only give generously but who can convince others to give large amounts.

It needs its Sheila and Jody Grant, whose vision for Klyde Warren Park took many years to realize. It needs donors like Jim Halperin, who invested in what is now Halperin Park, formerly the Southern Gateway Park, or Mary McDermott Cook, who supported the Dallas Zoo through its turnaround.

Humann could have been that leader, but the opportunity is gone. Someone new must accept the challenge.

That person must either establish a new nonprofit or re-establish the credibility of Fair Park First. Either comes with challenges, but erasing Fair Park First strikes us as the more worrisome path.

The nonprofit made significant errors. The person it hired as CEO was ill-equipped for the job, and the trouble spiraled from there.

Ken Smith, president of the Revitalize South Dallas Coalition, worked with Humann to structure a deal to manage Fair Park, only to see it come to pieces when Spectra arrived and Fair Park First materialized as its nonprofit partner. Smith thinks there must be a reckoning.

"What Dallas needs is somebody to sit down and cry over [what happened] because it is a system that is pitiful," he said.

We need to understand what happened between OVG and Fair Park First, but we don't believe Fair Park First is the villain.

Despite mistakes, it established deep ties with South Dallas leaders. People like developer Jason Brown and the Rev. Todd Atkins, who serve on Fair Park First's board, are key partners a new champion will need.

Repair and reconciliation is the wiser course.

Pillar 3: A new private management plan

For now, City Hall must operate Fair Park. That is a poor long-term solution.

The city had no choice but to step in after OVG and Fair Park First failed, and city staff are devoted to Fair Park in ways OVG never was.

But the city is not set up for marketing and programming the park's facilities. Don't take our word for it. Willis Winters, who served as Dallas Park and Recreation director and is Fair Park's most respected historian, put it bluntly.

"The city doesn't have a capability for effective marketing. And you can look at the convention center as an example of that," he said. The city doesn't market conventions. It contracts with a nonprofit, Visit Dallas.

Fair Park does have a good masterplan that was updated in 2020 and focuses heavily on making Fair Park greener.

It comes up short in casting a vision for programming the park. A new private management plan must be more creative. Spectra won the bid to manage Fair Park because it was cheaper, but also because it promised, inaccurately, that it could program Fair Park's many facilities.

Winters recalled the days when traveling exhibitions regularly came through Fair Park. The city got excited when shows like "Catherine the Great: Treasures of Imperial Russia" came to town. Such traveling exhibitions are common, but few come to Fair Park anymore.

Fair Park has excellent concert venues, from the Cotton Bowl to the band shell to the Coliseum that OVG failed to book well or even maintain. Those are ripe for drawing more dollars.

The original exposition buildings represent untapped opportunities for pilot projects and novel ideas. Doing that requires energy and constant activity that the city, for all of its strengths, lacks.

A private general manager answering to a solid nonprofit board is more likely to succeed.

Pillar 4: Embrace the State Fair of Texas

The State Fair has been blamed for Fair Park's stagnation because the fair consumes the park for three months of the year. That creates huge challenges for other operators.

Let's be clear. The State Fair is the most generous and consistent tenant that Fair Park has and likely ever will have. The two are inseparable and must remain so.

As our former colleague Tristan Hallman, now a senior leader at Del Mar Fairgrounds near San Diego, Calif., recently wrote, "For those pushing a broader political agenda against the city's traditional political establishment, the State Fair has made for a convenient bogeyman when it comes to Fair Park's issues. But it's time for Dallas to dispense with the notion that the State Fair is holding back Fair Park."

Every challenge would be amplified by the fair's absence.

Pillar 5: Invest in the South Dallas/Fair Park Area Plan

For Fair Park to succeed, South Dallas must succeed.

The historical tension between South Dallas neighborhoods and Fair Park is well known, but it has abated. Many South Dallas leaders are eager to see Fair Park realize its potential and to see a South Dallas renaissance.

Key leaders, including Atkins, Diane Ragsdale, Sherri Mixon and Hank Lawson, worked for years to establish the recently adopted South Dallas/Fair Park area plan as a renewed vision of prosperity and growth.

Redevelopment is already happening in South Dallas, and too much of it is incompatible with the area's character.

"I tell people now jokingly, but seriously, I can't afford even to live across the street from my church now because it has skyrocketed," Atkins said.

Community leaders, some of whom once resisted change, now recognize it has to be embraced and harnessed. That opens the opportunity for a new relationship with Fair Park.

This history of segregation and abuse can never be forgotten. But residents and leaders are ready to turn the page. Persistently involving South Dallas leaders in the future of Fair Park is essential, and the State Fair has already done important work here.

Pillar 6: Complete the community park

Too much debate around Fair Park right now is focused on how the city should move forward with the construction of a 10.5-acre community park at the corners of Exposition and Fitzhugh avenues.

The park should be built, and Fair Park First should have the opportunity to finish the work it started in seeing it to completion.

Opponents feel that Fair Park First has lost too much credibility and that the park will be an underutilized resource drain.

Those critiques may prove true. But withdrawing support for the community park strikes us as more damaging than carrying on.

No, the park is not recompense for generations of mistreatment. But it is a symbol of a new beginning. And it is so far along that stopping now would only call into question our ability to get anything done.

The community park should be an opportunity for Fair Park First to demonstrate its ability, absent OVG, to accomplish something big. If it can, that's a good reason to rehabilitate the nonprofit with a new philanthropic champion we hope might be reading this now.

The debate over the community park is important, but it's a small matter relative to the bigger questions at stake. Let's get this park done while we move on to what matters most: the success of the greater Fair Park.

Pillar 7: Never give up

If you've gotten this far, you already know how important this is. If you happen to be the sort of person described in Pillar 2, please know we wrote this for you.

We need someone who recognizes the importance of Fair Park. We need it for our history. We need it for our soul.

A collection of old buildings on a fairground may not mean much to some cities. But for Dallas, it is central to our origin story.

Fair Park is what Dallas wanted to be when it showed itself to the world in 1936.

2036 is right around the corner yet far away enough to set goals for it and see them through.

Can we be the city we were 100 years ago, ready to dream about something beautiful and then see it rise up so we could share it with the world?

Editorials on this page are written by the editorial board and serve as the voice and opinion of The Dallas Morning News.