

Fair site free and clear for Classic

Corporate event would have run into tailgaters

By David Williams

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The Southern Heritage Classic will have the Mid-South Fairgrounds to itself on Sept. 10.

Amid predictions of gridlock by SHC producer Fred Jones, officials of Libertyland on Thursday dropped plans for a corporate rental of the park that day.

Park officials decided to "be the good neighbor and try and reschedule our event," said Ron Hardin, general manager of Libertyland and the Mid-South Fair. "Hopefully, we'll be able to."

The turnabout ended a budding public feud between the fairgrounds neighbors.

A day earlier, Hardin had said the park's event, expected to draw 1,500 to 2,500 people, would proceed despite Jones's concerns.

Hardin had said the park staged game-day events throughout the Classic's history, without major problems.

He also said it was a financial issue for the park, which along with the fair has become a money-loser in recent years as attendance has dropped. The two nonprofits have lost a combined \$1 million to \$1.8 million over the last four years, he said.

But by Thursday afternoon, the park's event was off and the fairgrounds were cleared for the SHC and its tens of thousands of tailgating fans.

What happened, in the course of one day?

On Wednesday, Jones had said Memphis Mayor Willie Herenton and Shelby County Mayor A C Wharton had been made aware of the issue.

But on Thursday, Jones downplayed any notion that political pressure played a part in the resolution.

"I've been told this was a decision from the board of the Mid-South Fair," he said. "It was just in the best interests of everybody concerned, realizing that we have so much to get done on that day.

"They were willing to work with us, to help facilitate that."

Hardin said much the same thing.

"If any other officers received any phone calls or had personal conversations with anybody, I'm not aware," he said. "It was just a discussion on our part, brought up by me, as to what we wanted to do.

"(Board members) just thought the best thing to do was to go ahead and accommodate Mr. Jones and the Southern Heritage Classic at this point."

There are no plans for Libertyland game-day events in future years either, he said.

The decision means Libertyland will miss a potential warm-weather Saturday for an outdoor corporate event.

But Hardin said, "We're hoping they'll be able to move to a November date. We think we'll have a couple of dates in November prior to Thanksgiving that the weather will be good enough that a company would want to move to that date."

The Libertyland event had been scheduled for 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

The SHC, between Jackson State and Tennessee State, kicks off at 6 p.m. But tailgating begins days in advance and, Jones said, 90 percent of tailgaters could be on the grounds by 8 a.m. on game day.

He said traffic and parking are the biggest challenges to the event's growth and success.

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