



Village of Pinehurst Welcomes Use of Historic Fair Barn and Harness Track

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Successfully preserving a by-gone era is a practice that the Village of Pinehurst has mastered. And embracing the combination of a tired agricultural fair barn with the adage of “sow’s ear” and “silk purse” took them on a whole new venture, one that has proven its worth for over ten years.

In 1991, the Village didn’t plan on owning horse barns and stables, but when an historic property like the Fair Barn and Harness Track was on the verge of becoming a large condominium development, plans changed.

Village Manager Andy Wilkison recalled a groundswell of public support to preserve the 111 acres about a half mile from the center of the Village.

“Folks got concerned about the plans of the developer, and some local citizens started the ‘Save The Track’ organization, and ultimately over half the town signed a petition which was given to the Village Council,” Wilkison recollected. “At first, the Council was a little resistant to that – not because they wanted it developed but because they weren’t sure that (buying the land) was something we ought to be doing.”

In the end, the Council realized the importance of preserving that part of the history of Pinehurst and struck a deal with the owners. The Village took out a loan and commenced to operate the property as a horse track, owning the barns and leasing stalls on a seasonal



basis. There were 15 barns; the one known as #4 became very special: the Fair Barn.

Another generous undertaking of the Tufts' family involved building the Fair Barn in 1917. Also known as the Amphidrome, it served as an exhibition hall for the SandhillsFair, one of the major country fairs in the southeast from 1915-1925. Award-winning livestock and home goods could be found in abundance at the Fair Barn, the oldest surviving early twentieth-century fair/exhibition hall in North Carolina.

Despite its humble beginnings, the fair was well-attended by folks from North Carolina and neighboring states. The three-day fall fair was adjacent to the sprawling 56-acre Pinehurst Race Track complex, also a Tufts family donation in 1910. The track, which included stables and a grandstand, was a particularly beneficial addition for the Carolina Hotel's northern visitors who brought their horses and participated in a growing number of equestrian events.



In time, interest in the agricultural components of the fair waned and the barn transitioned into stables for the horses. It was a timber-framed, Mission-style building with four corner towers, roof-ridged skylights and large round windows anchoring the north and south ends.

“When the Village bought it, it had a dirt floor. It had stalls down the middle that backed up to each other and there were stalls around the interior walls, and it was rough in there,” laughed Wilkison. “There were rats and cats and bats living in there.”

Wilkison acknowledged that it is unusual for a municipality to own a property such as the barns and track complex, but noted that the Council viewed it as an important part of Village history which needed to be preserved. Both the barns and track were placed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1992.

The half-mile horse track has been a winter training facility for many years, the scene of a variety of outside events including equine, car shows and family-friendly July 4th

festivities. The track will again serve as the main transportation shuttle depot for visitors to the U.S. Opens in June.

“It’s like that Harness Track was made for that purpose. The U.S. Open patrons can be bussed in very quickly and comfortably from the north and south satellite parking lots and have a drop-off point right across the street from the main golf course



entrance,” observed Wilkison. “We are happy to partner with the U.S.G.A. on this arrangement because, in my opinion, it works out very well.”

The Fair Barn suffered the ravages of a tornado in 1932 and little had been done to bring back the handsome building. But restoration and preservation came with a price.

The Pinehurst Historic Preservation Foundation must have been in search of that “sow’s ear.”



“They (Foundation) met with Council in the late 90s with ideas to restore the Barn, so after discussion, we entered into an agreement that they would provide private funding for it and in return, the Village would allow it to be restored and enhanced,” said Wilkison. “We would then operate it at a high level and be responsible for keeping it up once it was completed.”

The Foundation, led by Joyce Franke, launched a major capital campaign with widespread participation, including grants from the State of North Carolina. Once the two phases were concluded, the finished hall would be approximately 6,600 square-feet, accommodating hundreds of people in differing layouts. This fit the community survey results which indicated an urgent need for a spacious, flexible community gathering place.

Phase One focused on exterior renovations which included stabilizing the basis structure and restoration of the outside.

The more costly Phase Two proved to be the vintage connection to the much-needed “silk purse.” With a new slate roof in place, the makings of a community gathering place came together. Horse stalls and balconies were removed and a new concrete floor was installed. More importantly, an aesthetically-correct modern addition was constructed on the west side to allow the Fair Barn to function as an elegant event location and social destination.

“The final piece to complete the Foundation’s massive job was an auxiliary building that would house a commercial kitchen, offices, dressing areas and bathrooms,” added Wilkison. “The Village took out a loan to finish the renovations, and over the years we have maintained it, made some small renovations and enhanced the parking lots. Remember, this barn was just four walls.”

The remarkable transformation from an aging agricultural exhibition hall to a stunning venue for weddings, receptions, trade shows, auctions, proms and concerts makes scheduling the flexible, open space exciting. Wooden scissor trusses have created an incredible ambience, matched by the large skylights reaching 2½ stories high.



Danaka Bunch, Events Coordinator for the Fair Barn, says that all Saturdays in 2014 are booked by non-profit events, fundraisers, and weddings and have been for months.

“The historic charm is a big plus for this building, along with the modern amenities including the commercial kitchen and dressing rooms,” Bunch said. “With the social trends focusing on rustic elegance, the Fair Barn and our area have become popular destinations. It also helps that all of our clients can pick all of their own vendors.”

Bunch added that the Village Council recently approved a half-day and full-day corporate package for meetings and retreats to encourage weekday businesses, in addition to unique social events, to utilize all the many benefits of the Barn’s space.



Countless hours and courageous decisions between the Village and the Foundation have created another incredibly unique source for local pride. And when asked about the returns on the investments made by so many to preserve valuable open space for a growing community, the Village Manager had a quick one-word answer: priceless.

“It’s very close to breaking even. But to not have that facility for the Village--you just can’t put a price on that,” Wilkison paused. “The goodwill that it has, the ambience that it adds when people are in there for an event?”

“It is jaw-dropping how beautiful this building is.”