

Fresno wants to sell Chukchansi Park's little-used \$330,000 stage for \$25,000

By George Hostetter



Ryan Young, media relations coordinator for the Fresno Grizzlies, left, and Grizzlies head groundskeeper David Jimenez, right, check out the mobile stage parked behind the right-centerfield fence at Chukchansi Park. JOHN WALKER — THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

-
-
-



Fresno City Hall's ill-starred mobile entertainment stage will finally get a chance to shine — after it leaves town.

The City Council on Thursday will decide whether to sell the city's seldom-used stage at Chukchansi Park to a food-services company.



The 40-ton stage cost an estimated \$330,000. City Hall wants to get rid of it for a mere \$25,000, a 92% discount.

Even at that, Fresno might be getting the better end of the deal.



The stage “was used maybe once or twice,” City Manager Bruce Rudd said. “It’s just sitting out there, continuing to deteriorate. It takes up a lot of space. We’re getting 25 grand for something that’s not going to be used. The number seems reasonable.”

It’s likely the stage saw more action than that. For example, Barney the purple dinosaur was slated to use the stage a week after it got to Fresno in 2002. But there can be no doubt that Ovation FanFare, a Florida-based food services company, is buying a seldom-used product.

According to the City Hall staff report, Ovation at its cost will move the stage to the Cal Expo site in Sacramento. An Ovation spokeswoman said the stage will be used for entertainment events. Ovation has the concessions contract at Chukchansi Park.

Rudd said the \$25,000 would be spent on maintenance at a stadium about to begin its 14th season as home to Triple A professional baseball.

City Hall is constantly selling assets no longer needed. It’s doubtful whether this stage ever had value for the city other than as a political pawn.

The background begins in the 1990s when City Hall and owners of the Fresno Grizzlies baseball team battled over construction of a downtown stadium. Key decisions were made in late 2000 and early 2001 to build a \$40 million-plus stadium at taxpayer expense.

City officials pitched a complex formula to explain how the \$3.4 million annual bill on the construction bonds would be paid with minimal effect on Fresno’s bottom line. A key part of this formula was profits generated by turning the stadium into a year-around entertainment venue when the Grizzlies were idle.

Some of these events were to be promoted by City Hall. Most were to be the product of officials from the Fresno Diamond Group, the Grizzlies’ owner at the time (Fresno Baseball Club LLC currently owns the Grizzlies).

Diamond Group officials said they were experts when it came to promoting outdoor events such as concerts.

The debt-servicing formula and the Diamond Group’s assurances were pivotal to solidifying public acceptance of an ambitious stadium project.

But there was one big unanswered question when it came to turning a baseball stadium into an entertainment venue able to compete with downtown’s Convention Center, the Save Mart Center soon to come to Fresno State and an American Indian gaming industry enjoying steady growth: how?

The answer: a specially-designed mobile stage. March, July, October, December — time of year wouldn’t matter. City Hall and the Diamond Group would simply sign the act, do a little advertising, move the stage from its storage spot beyond the center field fence to the pitcher’s mound, then open the doors to the hordes of ticket buyers. The money would roll in.

So the thinking went. Everyone acted accordingly. The Diamond Group had a 40-ton mobile stage designed and built, then paid the tab. City Hall became owner when it gave the Diamond Group a rent credit equal to the stage’s cost.

Two things went wrong.

First, Fresno was found to be hot in July, cold in October, foggy in December and rainy in March. The other months had meteorological challenges for outdoor concert promoters, as well.

Second, the few entertainment groups to play at the stadium usually brought their own stage or made other arrangements for a stage.

The city's mobile stage quickly settled into its job as an expensive landing spot for long home runs in one of the stadium's power alleys.

Still, there was one moment of glory. It came on a sunny Thursday morning in mid-September 2002 when Diamond Group officials invited reporters to the stadium. The new stage had arrived from Southern California. It was to be put through its paces.

The stage measured 48 feet by 64 feet. The roof, capable of supporting 15 tons of lighting and sound equipment, could be raised 40 feet above the platform. The stage's weight was spread over 128 golf-cart-sized tires to protect the turf.

The outfield gates opened. The stage, propelled by a power system not at all obvious to the media, crossed the warning track. The lip from track to outfield grass was just a half-inch high. But that proved too much. The last row of wheels got stuck.

Two forklifts and a John Deere tractor emerged from the shadows to get the stage moving again.

Council Member Lee Brand this week said it's good riddance to such a fiasco.

"We had all these high expectations for the stadium," Brand said. "The stage is symbolic."

Contact George Hostetter: ghostetter@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6272 or [@GeorgeHostetter](https://twitter.com/GeorgeHostetter) on Twitter.

Copyright

© 2015 www.fresnobee.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.fresnobee.com>