



# 2025

# Chippewa County Fairground Grandstand Replacement

## Kinross Charter Township, Chippewa County, MI

Chippewa County is situated just North of the Mackinac Bridge and has a connection to Sault Ontario. What was once a thriving area has seen its share of infrastructure problems exacerbated by the declassification and closing of the Kincheloe Air Force Base in 1977 and population loss of 10,000.

This rural community is now heavily dependent on tourism and recreational opportunities including a 100-acre all-season fairground. The fairground property is unique in that it encompasses a swimming area and beach, animal barns, a 4-H Event Facility, camping areas, a racetrack, exhibit buildings, horse arenas, and numerous support facilities. With the help of several smaller MDARD grants, the fair has been able to add a bathhouse and do several deferred electrical upgrades, but the public infrastructure is generally past its service life.



The wooden grandstands were built in 1976. The grandstands and track see a variety of uses including concerts, stock car racing, pageants, snowmobile racing, mud drags, harness racing, horse pulling, church services, demolition derbies, and tractor parades within the calendar year. A spectator fell through the stands in 2023. A structural engineering firm then reviewed the condition of the grandstands and recommended immediately reducing allowable occupancy to 60-70% due to the condition of the wooden decking and support structure. The structural firm also recommended seeking a complete replacement within the next 5 years. Grandstand events are the primary money maker for the Fairgrounds and drive over a million dollars in local economic activity between events, parking, tickets, livestock auctions, and prizes.

The Grandstand Replacement and Expansion project at the Chippewa County Fairgrounds aims to dramatically improve the safety, accessibility, and functionality of one of the community's most vital public spaces. The plan includes demolishing several adjacent aging structures and increasing seating capacity from approximately 1,800 to 4,000, while creating a fully ADA-accessible, all-season atmosphere for spectators. Modern amenities—including accessible restrooms, concession areas, and a meeting room—will be constructed underneath the new grandstands, providing year-round usability and enhancing the overall visitor experience. The estimated project cost, based on comparable upgrades at Ingham County Fairgrounds, is approximately \$5 million.

Kinross Township, which owns the fairgrounds property, is deeply committed to public recreation and long-term resource stewardship. Both Kinross Township and Chippewa County have endorsed the project, recognizing its value to the community, but neither government has the funding capacity to fully finance the improvements. The Chippewa County Fair, which leases and operates the fairgrounds, brings in about \$840,000 annually and pays out roughly \$790,000 in operational costs, leaving only \$50,000 per year for maintenance and improvements. Historically, county fairs like Chippewa's relied heavily on revenue from horse racing and state funding tied to the racing industry. That funding source was eliminated between 2008 and 2010 when the state restructured its support model, leaving rural fairs with aging infrastructure and limited alternatives. The Chippewa County Fair continues to serve the region with dedication, but replacing the grandstands is beyond its current financial reach. Support for this project would revitalize a key community hub, expanding opportunities for recreation, cultural events, and economic development throughout the region.



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