EXECCONNECT



RAY ALLISON
'FAIR'-MINDED LEADER

By Rebecca Patrick

For many Hoosiers, the Indiana State Fairgrounds are defined by those unmistakable August markers: livestock barns and lemon shake-ups, concerts and midway lights, ribbon-winning 4-H projects and annual food favorites.

Ray Allison has his own musts: sirloin tips, a ribeye sandwich or pork burger, a Dairy Bar milkshake, a walk through Pioneer Village and the Glass Barn – and, yes, he's a fan of the "sights and smells" of the livestock barns too.

But for Allison, the 250-acre property is also a year-round business engine – one that hosts hundreds of events, supports jobs, welcomes schoolchildren for agricultural education and continues to reinvent itself while protecting one of Indiana's most enduring traditions.

Allison became executive director of the Indiana State Fair Commission – the governing body overseeing the year-round operation of the Indiana State Fairgrounds & Event Center and the annual Indiana State Fair – in April. It was the culmination of more than three decades with the organization, starting as a 19-year-old college intern and later working across nearly every department.

In this conversation, he discusses the State Fairgrounds' economic role, opportunities for employers and partners, agriculture education and the bond that has made his love for the State Fair feel even more meaningful.

***BizVoice*®: The State Fair is a beloved summer tradition, but the Indiana Fairgrounds are also a year-round operation. How do you balance those two identities?**

RA: "The balance is easy because the two are so interdependent these days. The State Fair is the 174-year-old institution and why we exist is to put on that event every August. But that event isn't what it is today without everything we do the rest of the time. We've been fortunate through the support of a number of governors and the Indiana General Assembly to be able to invest a lot of money in this campus, (especially) the last 20 to 25 years. But that money probably doesn't get invested if we're just producing an event that's 15 days every August. As we've built new buildings and renovated buildings, we've made them multi-use, so they can host events, drive impact and make a difference throughout the year. But at the end of the day, they also support the State Fair being successful. So, the two go hand in hand."

BV: What would you like Hoosiers and businesses to know about what happens outside those 15 days?

RA: "There are upwards of 400 events that take place on the campus (annually). You've got your traditional winter events that have been here for a very long time: the Indianapolis Home Show; the Indianapolis Boat, Sport and Travel Show; and the Indiana Flower and Patio Show. We're coming up next year on 20 years of hosting the Mecum Auto Auction every May, their spring classic (sale). (It's) their second-largest auction in the U.S.

"Then when we opened up the Indiana Farm Bureau Fall Creek Pavilion in 2023, we designed that to also be an indoor track facility. So, we put a 200-meter indoor track in that building every year. (Since) we've operated that, we've hosted the Big Ten Indoor Track and Field Championships twice; the NCAA Division II National Championships; the Missouri Valley Conference Championship; and the Hoosier State Relays, which is this indoor championship for high school track and field. We also host the Christmas Night of Lights drive-thru show every Christmas."

BV: Put in perspective the State Fairgrounds' economic impact …

RA: "We're responsible for about $320 million on an annual basis and about 1,100 jobs that exist because of what happens at this facility. Now, our staff's not 1,100 people, but again, because of all of the events and everything that happens here, we're responsible for about 1,100 jobs. We take great pride in that – knowing the investments that have

been made here and the things we get to do here are driving that kind of impact for our city and for our state – and really creating jobs for Hoosiers."

BV: What's your message to businesses about opportunities to connect with the organization?

RA: "Don't forget about us up here on East 38th Street. … There are opportunities for businesses to be involved with us in so many different ways, whether that is sponsoring the Indiana State Fair and reaching those 850,000 people that come through our gates over 15 days, hosting events out here that can be anything from a small luncheon for 50 people to a trade show that attracts hundreds of thousands of people. Our campus is able to host and facilitate all of that. … If there are businesses that have new ventures – have things they want to try – we're open to the conversation to see if it fits here at our campus. It might be something we've never done before, but that doesn't mean we can't try it. We're always trying to grow and we're not afraid to reinvent ourselves."

BV: How do you keep agriculture prominent and relevant for new generations and urban audiences?

RA: "We have a really robust ag education program and department that operates all year that has three full-time staff members. We welcome about 12,000 kids to the campus (annually) for field trips that are agriculture focused. The most popular being 'Farm to Pizza,' where we take kids through everything that goes into making everybody's favorite food. They get to make and eat their own pizza at the culmination of that field trip.

"During COVID, we started virtual field trips. The most popular now being 'There's a Pig in My Classroom,' where we connect kids virtually to a working hog farm in northern Indiana called Legacy Farms that's part of The Pig Adventure family at Fair Oaks. Since we launched that program in 2021, we've reached about 40,000 kids in all 92 counties, all 50 U.S. states, three U.S. territories and three foreign countries. So, we're taking ag education here from the Indiana State Fairgrounds to quite literally the world. In today's day and age with so many folks being separated and disconnected from agriculture, we think it's important they understand where their food comes from."

BV: Where do you see the biggest prospects for growth or modernization?

RA: "Everywhere. I referenced the indoor track and field business when we renovated the Indiana Farm Bureau Fall Creek Pavilion. If you'd asked me 10 years ago if we'd be in the indoor track business, I would've said, 'No, what is that?' The Christmas Night of Lights show, which started as a promoter just renting space from us as a successful event, (then) he decided he wanted to sell the show. … That's just a new line of business, a new business opportunity that's generating revenue for us, but it's also making an impact in a community and creating, again, Christmas traditions for families all across central Indiana.

"We also have permanent tenants that (have offices) here on the grounds. We have a distillery that produces product in one of our buildings. So again, we're always looking to grow and reinvent ourselves, but we always stay true to who we are as being that organization that produces the great Indiana State Fair."



Ray Allison says connecting young people with Indiana agriculture remains central to the State Fair's mission. "We were created all those years ago to promote Indiana agriculture, and that's who we are at our core," he says.

BV: You followed longtime executive director Cindy Hoye. What was the most important lesson or lessons you learned from her that's impacted your approach?

RA: "Cindy was always willing to try new things. She used to tell us the fair had to be fresh and new every year – that we've got to bring new things to the fair to keep that excitement and keep it relevant. But probably more than anything, it was just her understanding that transferred to me that, serving in this role, I'm really the caretaker for a 174-year-old institution. My role is to step in here and take care of this organization, move it forward, play my part to make sure it's successful and hopefully that it continues for another 174 years."

BV: What is one of your favorite State Fair memories?

RA: "That's like asking someone to pick their favorite child. I love everything about the fair and every memory I've made. I think for me though, as a father who has a 13-year-old daughter right now, the fact that she loves the fair as much as I do is probably my favorite thing. I have to be here early in the morning (on opening day) for the Indiana Pork Producers Ham Breakfast. She comes with me, gets up at five o'clock and is here with me at 6 a.m. for the ham breakfast. We blare 'This Is the Greatest Show' song on the radio driving in every morning. And a few years ago she got a chance to meet the Governor, and he asked her if she liked the State Fair. She said, 'Opening day is the best day of the year. It's even better than my birthday!' Knowing that I have passed that (love) on to a future generation is probably one of the most meaningful things and important memories that's happened to me over 34 years."

BV: What do you hope Hoosiers will say about the Indiana Fairgrounds & Event Center in the next 10 years?

RA: "I'm hoping they continue to see an organization that is growing with them. As our community changes and as their wants change and their needs change, that our organization is evolving with them … that we're continuing to invest in this (campus) to make sure it's a modern facility with all of the amenities that our guests expect.

"We're just getting started here at the Indiana State Fairgrounds, and I'm really excited about what's coming next."

RESOURCE: Ray Allison, Indiana State Fairgrounds & Event Center, at www.indianastatefair.com