

AT&T pledges \$40,000 to Jackson County Fair for awards for fair competitors

By [Holly Klaft | Jackson Citizen Patriot](#)

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Competitors at the Jackson County Fair will not walk away empty handed at next summer's event.

After having prize money reduced to a pittance this year, exhibitors will see better rewards in 2010 thanks to one company's donation.

AT&T announced Friday it would give the fair \$40,000, which county officials said will be used to fund premiums — cash awards paid to competitors — for two years.

"I came to the fair as a kid, and I enjoyed the fair," said AT&T Michigan President Jim Murray, a Jackson native who attended the fair with his family last year. "I knew the trouble they had, and I knew this is something that would be good."

The fair was left with only \$15,000 for prizes this year — all of which the fair contributed — and was forced to reduce rewards when the state cut \$1.5 million in funding meant to supplement premiums statewide.

Fair officials said that resulted in fewer exhibitors heading to the fair to show livestock, produce and other items — 1,730 this year compared to 1,917 in 2008. They worried continued low participation in agricultural and homemaking competitions could cause overall fair attendance, which was its second lowest in a decade this year, to drop.

"It's a huge thing to the fair to make sure our premium program stays healthy because that keeps our fair healthy," said Denise Owens, who is in charge of day-to-day operations at the fairgrounds. The fair plans to contribute \$15,000 for premiums at next year's event and with the company's donation cash awards will be closer to 2008 levels, said county Administrator Randy Treacher.

Exhibitors could receive as much as \$500 in prize money for a single entry in 2008 when the state was contributing premium funding. The fair had expected to get \$39,000 in premium support from the state in 2009, before the money was eliminated.

Prize amounts, which have not yet been established, will also depend on the number of competitors, Treacher said.

State Sen. Mike Nofs, R-Battle Creek, said he reached out to AT&T officials for help when he heard about the fair's financial struggles.

The fair had an almost \$180,000 deficit by the end of last year and was struggling to pay its bills after the fair in August.

Mindy Coppernoll, treasurer of the Jackson County 4-H Council, said many of the program's youths donated their winnings back to the fair this year when they found out the event was struggling financially.

"One of our toughest situations last year was taking premium money away," said fair board member and county Commissioner Jim Videto.

Even when the fair offered larger prizes, competitors hardly broke even after spending money to bring livestock to the event, fair officials and competitors said. With little or no prize money, competitors would lose money to bring animals to the fair, they said.

Dave Cox's daughter showed horses in open-class competitions at the fair this year despite the reduction in prize money and said there were noticeably fewer competitors. "Without the cut it was even hard to break even, but you come for the enjoyment of it," said Cox of Blackman Township, who is president of the Jackson County 4-H Council. He said he hoped the increase in premiums would bring back exhibitors that were deterred by the cuts. "It's got to help," he said.