

HAMPTON VA

NEWS RELEASE

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Hampton to focus on more frequent festivals

June 2, 2015 - Hampton Bay Days will mark its 33rd year in September. Throughout its existence, two things have been constant struggles: City support and a mission that tried to cover both Chesapeake Bay education and popular entertainment.

“Hampton Bay Days has been an important Hampton tradition for more than 30 years,” said Mayor George Wallace. “It brought people from all around the region to visit downtown, drawing about a quarter of a million people annually in its heyday. It was a great thing for the city of Hampton.”

That came at a cost: The City of Hampton supported the festival to the tune of \$150,000 in 2008. That had dropped to \$87,000 by fiscal 2010 and \$50,000 in more recent years. And that’s just the cash support, not counting contributions of staff and equipment the city makes – in addition to allowing the Bay Days organization, an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit group, to use and charge for most of the city’s parking lots.

The event was cited in many lists over its run: “Top 20 events in the Southeast,” by the Southeast Tourism Society in 1989; and one of the top three North American festivals for 2003 and 2004 by Events Media and www.eventcrazy.com.

The main stage that was once filled with popular national acts (teen idols Hanson, The Band, Tammy Wynette, Bruce Hornsby, the Commodores, the Beach Boys, Richie Havens, The Fabulous Thunderbirds and Willie Nelson) shifted to more regional bands, and crowds for the three-day festival grew smaller.

By 2001, the Daily Press’ music columnist was noting that the event that year “lacks the marquee punch expected from Bay Days.”

Always, the festival has wavered between meeting two goals: Educating the public on the importance of the Chesapeake Bay and providing an entertaining atmosphere.

Back in 1996, City Council debated the future of Bay Days. “The debate has been there from the beginning,” then-city manager Robert J. O’Neill Jr. is quoted in a Daily Press story as saying. “Is Bay Days for community groups? Is it for family entertainment? Is it a tourist attraction? Or is it educational? Many of those are vastly different objectives, and many of them are conflicting.”

In 2008, when the festival was canceled due to Tropical Storm Hanna, then-Mayor Molly Joseph Ward pushed the volunteer group to address whether the event was meant to draw people

downtown, to educate people about the Chesapeake Bay, or to provide entertainment, according to a newspaper story.

This year, City Council has told the Bay Days organization that in the future it will not continue to receive the level of funding it has gotten in the past. City contributions of \$50,000 plus in-kind contributions from the city are expected to be sufficient to support this year's festival as planned. However, for fiscal year 2016, there is \$10,000 in the budget, and in-kind contributions are expected to drop accordingly. The city isn't canceling the event.

If Bay Days doesn't continue, it won't mean an end to downtown festivals and fun. The Chesapeake Bay Reggae Festival has moved from Buckroe Beach to downtown. City support helps fund bands for four months of Saturday night Block Parties on Queensway in conjunction with the Downtown Business Development Partnership. The City runs two downtown festivals itself: The increasingly popular Blackbeard Festival and the International Children's festival.

Those festivals have a clear goal and a clear mission. They have a theme and bring a dedicated audience to visit downtown. "The days of the giant, three-day festival that appeals to everyone may be over," said Vice Mayor Linda Curtis. "It's been a great run, but it's not the best investment for our taxpayers. We think we can serve residents as well as draw visitors to downtown – and other areas of the city – with a series of varied, targeted events."

For example, on June 20, the downtown business group is sponsoring a "Slide the City" event that will turn the Booker T. Washington Bridge on Settlers Landing Road into a giant slip-and-slide that will run for 1,000 feet. The merchants group has also sponsored other events, such as "Rolling of the Bulls" roller derby, a Landlocked Boat Parade down Queensway for St. Patrick's Day, and a lighted crab pot drop for New Year's.

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