

News

Arts, Beats & Eats coming to Royal Oak

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The Arts, Beats & Eats festival, which has been the prominent Labor Day weekend event and based in Pontiac since its start, is moving to downtown Royal Oak in 2010.

Event producer Jon Witz made the announcement today at the Sangria Tapas Cafe in Royal Oak.

Royal Oak officials were pleased with the decision.

Royal Oak Mayor Jim Ellison said: "This is a great event for the city, we're looking forward to the event crowd ... this is the kind of event that fits Royal Oak."

Royal Oak officials were concerned about over-taxing the police department with Arts, Beats & Eats, and the Woodward Dream Cruise, but they were assured by the police department that they are up to the task, Ellison said.

Witz said the years in Pontiac were good, but he felt the festival had to move.

"The citizens, residents and downtown businesses of Pontiac were incredible hosts for years," said Witz, the longtime producer of Arts, Beats & Eats. Downtown was safe and vibrant, with the Phoenix Center available for concerts.

"We were not looking to move the festival. We simply did not have an agreement. It was a reflection of the vision or lack thereof of city leaders."

The Royal Oak DDA is going to invest \$100,000 up front for the Arts, Beats and Eats festival. The mayor said the city will recoup money from parking fees.

The move has been expected for some time, as festival organizers have worked with Royal Oak officials over specifics.

On Monday night, the Royal Oak Downtown Development Authority approved a proposed contract with festival organizers.

The announcement that the Arts, Beats and Eats festival will move from Pontiac to Royal Oak next year is not good news for business owners in downtown Pontiac, but a new festival may find its way into the city.

"Hopefully, we'll be bigger and better than what Jon (Witz) provided for us," with Arts, Beats and Eats, said Fred Leeb, Pontiac's emergency financial manager.

He added: "We have a huge venue with the Phoenix Center and my intent is to find a promoter to take on that venue and have a new festival."

Leeb said the financing of the festival was the crux of the problem between Pontiac and festival organizers.

"This summer we put in \$85,000 and actually, Jon had wanted us to sign a six-year contract with him going forward for a total of \$600,000," Leeb said. "It was a lot of money; not only was there this expenditure but the risk that there would be even higher expenditures because of the way the deal was structured."

Leeb said the city tried negotiating with him, seeking only to break even, but that Witz did not budge on his offer.

"I think he played one city against another, and I don't think that's good for the county," Leeb said. "Of course I'm upset, because I think the festival should've stayed here; I feel badly that he's leaving but I think it shouldn't stop us from having something in the downtown. I think we have an opportunity to do something great for the city."

Witz said he first offered the six-year contract to the city in May. At first, the city requested that the festival pay it \$100,000 as rent for the downtown.

"To me, that's not negotiation. That's telling an event you don't appreciate what they deliver for the city," Witz said.

Leeb said the city requested \$100,000 in rent because, "Normally, when a performer comes to a venue, they pay for it."

The city declined Witz' initial six-year contract, and the two sides could not come to an agreement.

Business owners in downtown Pontiac were disappointed to hear of the festival's move, but understanding of the city's financial decision.

"I can understand the city not wanting to subsidize Arts, Beats and Eats," said Lee Todd, owner of Todd Enterprises, a property management company located in the Waterman Building.

Todd added: "It's going to have a large impact on several businesses in the area — the bars, restaurants and nightclubs were the local businesses that saw the immediate benefits of having (the festival) here. It was real dollars. That's a big weekend for each of the restaurants downtown."

Beyond those types of businesses, other downtown businesses benefited simply from the publicity and exposure the festival gave them, Todd said.

"It's really hard to quantify those benefits," Todd said. "The primary benefit to the downtown has been the immediate impact to bars and nightclubs, but the long-term benefit is exposing the downtown businesses to those suburbanites who wouldn't normally have a reason or occasion to come to the downtown."

Kevin Thompson, a city resident, developer and community activist, is hopeful that another festival or event will take the place of Arts, Beats & Eats.

"It will be sorely missed, but it is what it is," Thompson said. "If the administration of the past would've run the city appropriately, it wouldn't be bankrupt the way it is and Jon Witz wouldn't have to take (the festival) somewhere else."

Thompson called it a shame to lose the festival, but also added that "you can't change a city with a three-day event."

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