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Arts Beats & Eats moves to Royal Oak

By [Chad Halcom](#)

Pontiac-based **Arts Beats & Eats** is now **Arts Beats & Eats Royal Oak**, after organizers of the festival and Royal Oak city officials signed a five-year contract worth more than \$1 million for the city to host the event in its downtown district.

Oakland County Executive and honorary festival chairman L. Brooks Patterson and John Witz, owner and president of **John Witz and Associates** and the festival producer, formally signed a contract along with Royal Oak Mayor Jim Ellison and Executive Director Tim Thwing of the Royal Oak Downtown Development Authority at downtown Spanish restaurant **Sangria Tapas Cafe L.L.C.**

The deal was finalized earlier this week after nearly a month of negotiations between Witz and the city. It calls for police and fire services, and would close off the streets for the festival along Washington Avenue between Lincoln Street and the railroad tracks north of Fourth Street.

Festival activities will also extend to Lafayette and Main Street, for a total area almost equal to its current footprint in downtown Pontiac, where it has been based since 1998.

Witz, Ellison and City Manager Donald Johnson all estimated that police protection and other city services will cost Royal Oak roughly \$200,000 per year, to be split between the city and its DDA and recouped out of \$10 parking fees for an estimated 2,500-3,000 spaces available for attendees at the four-day festival on Labor Day weekend.

The contract calls runs for five years, but the parties have a right to revisit it and reopen negotiations 240 days before the third annual event, or in January 2012, Ellison said.

"There is always an element of risk to the plan. I mean, one four-day weekend of heavy rain could nearly ruin us," Ellison said of the arrangement with Witz. "But if the plan works out even reasonably well, there's a good chance of being an economic benefit not only to the city but to its businesses and the local economy."

Besides increasing festival parking from \$8 in Pontiac to \$10 in Royal Oak, the deal also calls for general admission to increase from \$2 to \$3 and for festival concert stage to move from the Phoenix Plaza Amphitheater to a parking lot with more than 35,000 square feet of space along Main between Sixth and Seventh Streets, Witz said.

Witz, who initiated discussions with Royal Oak about four weeks ago, said Tuesday the festival "was not looking to relocate" but has no current contract with Pontiac and had been "challenged from the city about our future." He also said Tuesday he did not expect a move closer to Detroit to put Arts Beats & Eats greater competition with the four-day **Detroit International Jazz Festival**, which

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coincides with the Labor Day weekend festival in downtown Detroit near the riverfront.

"I actually think it creates greater potential to collaborate with the Jazz Fest, where we could make easier or better cross-promotional arrangements, like a pass that's good one day at their event is good the next day at ours," he said.

The \$3 admission charge will also benefit participating nonprofit organizations after covering the festival's own costs, as will liquor sales during the event, Witz said. The festival drew an estimated 225,000 people its last year in Pontiac and could draw up to 300,000 attendees in September 2010, Witz said. Patterson said the festival has raised more than \$2.2 million for nonprofits in the 12 years since its inception.

Dawnaree Demrose, president of the **Pontiac Regional Chamber of Commerce**, said Tuesday that she learned of the formal decision to relocate through media reports and the news was a surprise, as the chamber had been offering to assist city Emergency Financial Manager Fred Leeb in further negotiations with Witz.

"This is a valuable and much-needed asset to the city, though we are also trying to get the city's own costs under control," she said. "This is a very tough challenge."

Patterson, however, said the festival he founded "had done a good job in Pontiac and could do an even better job in Royal Oak," and if Pontiac needed the festival it could have done more to keep it.

"This is something perhaps the city fathers should have thought more about, before the recent (relocation effort) events occurred," he said.