

NORTHERN APPALACHIAN FOLK FESTIVAL

a DOWNTOWN INDIANA EVENT

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'Wild Ride' Comes to an End...For Now

2019 NORTHERN APPALACHIAN FOLK FESTIVAL CANCELLED

INDIANA, PA -- Citing changing priorities and a potential calendar conflict, Downtown Indiana announced this week the cancellation of the 2019 Northern Appalachian Folk Festival.

Held annually the weekend after Labor Day, NAFF brought eclectic lineups and national acts — including Sophie B. Hawkins, Wheatus, Slim Jim Phantom of The Stray Cats, and Southern Culture on the Skids — to Indiana's Philadelphia Street for free performances.

Linda Mitchell, Downtown Indiana's executive director, said the decision was difficult with NAFF demonstrating it could be financially self-sufficient. "We found we could put on a festival with the potential to be a destination event and still keep it free to attend."

"We had a family from northern Virginia here to see the Pack a.d. [a band on the 2017 lineup]," said Mitchell. "They told us we were 'well worth a four-hour drive with three kids.'"

2018's heavy rains, which affected events throughout the region, suppressed attendance but fans still travelled to Indiana for Wheatus, Sophie B. Hawkins and Lucy Kaplansky.

However, Mitchell said Downtown Indiana was shifting its focus in the new year to promoting the business district as an "anytime destination."

"Events like NAFF take a year to plan and require a tremendous amount of work to orchestrate," she said, "we need to focus that energy on our merchants."

Downtown Indiana is a 501(c)3 non-profit that promotes and advocates for the town's main street district.

DI was among the original sponsors of the festival, first organized in 2013 by an Indiana University of Pennsylvania faculty member. DI took on a greater administrative role in 2015, with NAFF officially joining its portfolio of events the following year.

The festival, which had been struggling financially, successfully broadened its appeal to the community and sponsors under DI's stewardship.

Programming by partners such as the Children's Advisory Commission of Indiana County and themes such as coal and lumber heritage ensured the event remained family-friendly and educational despite the growing emphasis on music.

Dual themes of food and folklore were planned for 2019, before the festival's cancellation.

In recent years, NAFF's format featured multiple headliners supported by local, regional, and touring bands. "We brought acts to Indiana that people would otherwise have to leave town and buy a ticket to see," said festival co-chair Anthony Malandro, adding the community and festival drew raves from artists for its hospitality and sound crew.

In 2018, the event became a local story when the IUP faculty member, now retired, and two former steering committee members scheduled their own street concert the day before NAFF.

"We made the best of a difficult situation," said Mitchell, noting that the two events worked cooperatively with DI supplying a dumpster and sharing the cost of portable restrooms.

Festival co-chair Tracy Levitz said that the steering committee had recently become aware the competing event was requesting an expanded street closure in 2019 that included the DI event's traditional date and two-block footprint.

"From a logistical standpoint, we have to consider NAFF's place within a larger calendar, our vendors' preferences, and that the date has been part of a longterm promotional strategy. We didn't see the situation resolving itself gracefully."

Both Levitz and Malandro emphasized the steering committee's appreciation for NAFF's sponsors, volunteers, community partners, and the DI board—and thanked everyone for supporting 'a wild ride.'

"It's a loss and a disappointment but we're all looking at the bigger picture," said Mitchell, adding that no final decisions had been made regarding the event's future. "We're taking stock this year and using the time to redevelop the event based on what we've learned over the past several editions."

"For a town this size, what we accomplished so far is nothing short of amazing."

