

Headliner bands, event growth could spark evening charge at 2014 Ribfest



By Brock Weir

Thousands of people empty their wallets every September at Aurora's Ribfest, but 2014's party could cost hungry revellers just a little bit more to get in.

Organizers for the annual bash propose a \$10 admission for Friday and Saturday evening's entertainment following the success of this year's party with headliner band Honeymoon Suite. According to a report submitted to Councillors last week by Shelley Ware, Special Events Coordinator for the Town of Aurora, the bulk of Ribfest would remain free of charge, but the admission costs for the evening entertainment would help in cost-recovery and also ensuring a name headliner to build Aurora's Ribfest into something truly spectacular.

"The Aurora Ribfest has continued to grow successfully, year after year, both in community appeal and attendance levels," said Ms. Ware. "This event has evolved into a marquee regional event, attracting approximately 20,000 participants annually. Many of these event attendees have travelled to Aurora to experience this event and, therefore, have become an economic generator for local business."

Analysis has shown, she said, that Ribfest "contributed approximately \$3.1 million to the local economy" through purchases, hotels, and other spending.

"A key success factor for the 2013 Aurora Ribfest was the introduction of the headliner Honeymoon Suite," she added. "The attendance draw for this 90 minute performance was approximately 5,000 people. The feedback from the community was outstanding and many were eager to find out who would be playing the 2014 Aurora Ribfest."

While Councillors were unanimously in agreement on last year's success, they were, however, divided on whether an admission charge for the evening hours on Friday and Saturday was the right way forward.

"Ribfest obviously generates a lot of economic benefit for us [and] based on that alone, I just don't understand why we are trying to generate revenue," said Councillor Sandra Humfries. "I like the idea of getting a headliner band [and] [the event] is getting bigger and better all the time because of our live entertainment. Whatever Shelley Ware touches turns to gold, but I just think [the cost] is something the municipality can absorb."

Councillor Paul Pirri, however, said he was in favour of admissions to ensure the growth of the event. Doing so, and being in a position to attract name headliners, would help raise the profile of the event significantly.

"This would give us the opportunity to go for something no one else does," he said. "I think it is a really amazing niche market that could bring in a lot of revenue to the municipality. I am not opposed to asking for \$10 for an individual to come in and see this."

This wouldn't be the first change to the event, he added, noting this year's decision to put an 18-and-up limit on the evening

performances, ostensibly for crowd control but also to control, as Councillors noted last week, curbing some underage drinking.

'We had an incident two years ago with some alcohol-related problems and some of the youth which was eliminated this year,' said Councillor John Abel. 'It was handled very well. Some people were very negative about putting ID there, but it worked out really well.'

Although he said he had some doubts on the overall economic benefit of the festival in light of 'comments' he had received from some local restaurants who have said they take a bit of a hit when Ribfest rolls into Town, he said a \$10 admission fee for cost-recovery would be preferable to scuttling the event all together to save a bit of money.

Also expressing a degree of support for an admission fee was Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, but a \$10 fee was too steep for him. He suggested looking at halving that.

'If you look at the proposed 2014 Operating Budget for Ribfest, it looks like a profit of about \$33,000 based on a \$10 admission fee,' he said. 'If we reduce that to \$5, we're back to it costing the Town some money but we're easing towards that.'

Bolstering Councillor Humfryes' opposition to an admission charge was Councillor Michael Thompson. Comparing Aurora's Ribfest to its Burlington counterpart, he said he hoped the local event was 'just as successful' but that too is a free event.

'I just don't know if I want to charge anyone to attend,' he said. 'I like the idea it is a free event and I like the idea it brings people to Aurora. While local establishments might not see people eating there while Ribfest is on, I do know that after the band shell shuts down they go out onto Yonge Street and take advantage of some of our restaurants and local establishments.'

'As we grow and it becomes more of a name event, perhaps that deficit gets funded by sponsorship as opposed to wristbands.'