

Producer pulls out of planned multicultural festival

By Brock Weir

Dance in the Park has been an annual mainstay on the eve of Canada Day celebrations in 'Canada's Birthday Town,' but this year the dance comes with a new twist celebrating Canada's ' and Aurora's ' cultural diversity.

Or will it?

Last week, Council discussed the details of a retooled event spearheaded by Ranji Singh, whose foundation organizes the Town of Newmarket's South Asian Showcase, and a similar multicultural festival set for East Gwillimbury on July 3.

The event, according to a report from Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, will feature live bands, dancers showcasing Korean, Chinese and Russian traditions, local arts and sports organizations, food vendors providing traditional and exotic fare, interactive components, surrounded by décor designed by area youth based on Chinese lanterns.

But the Town will have forge ahead with the event on its own after Mr. Singh pulled out of the event.

His decision to withdraw from the planned 'Dance in the Park Celebrates Cultural Diversity' came on the heels of a contentious Council discussion last week questioning several components of the event unrelated to the program Mr. Singh's group was offering, including timing and location of the event.

Council called for a further report due back April 26 looking into holding the Multicultural Festival earlier in the day to be more family friendly, but some of the suggested changes didn't jive with Mr. Singh's vision, according to Aurora CAO Doug Nadorozny.

'He felt that some of the changes that were being made aren't consistent with the style of event he was trying to put on and he was trying to leverage other events he was trying to put on and he felt the differences that with the differences that were emerging that it would be better if he didn't look after this event.

'We wanted to rely on his expertise and some of the momentum he had with other events, but staff are quite capable of picking it up from here and we are moving forward to plan the event.'

Mr. Singh referred all questions regarding his future involvement in such a festival to the Town's Parks and Recreation Department.

Dance in the Park Celebrates Cultural Diversity is, at press time, still set to take place at Town Park on June 30. Piggybacking on an existing event is a good way to lay the initial foundation of a new tradition, said Mr. Downey.

Not all Councillors, however, agreed with the concept ' particularly Councillor John Abel.

Councillor Abel offered frustration, saying he felt he wasn't kept in the loop over where things stood with the Festival, which was brought forward through a notice of motion last year from Councillor Harold Kim. Councillor Abel said he presented staff with the opportunity to use Magna's Hoedown tent for the event in September, but requests for updates on the offer were rebuffed.

'I have been constantly asking for some information on the parameters of putting an event under the tent and until I received this report here I have been given no response,' said Councillor Abel. 'I have a lot of concern with this going forward.'

But, with the budget for the event already set by Council last year, Mr. Downey said it was the practice of staff to start planning. Councillor Kim, he added, was the 'Council Champion' for the event and was kept in the loop over how things were progressing.

'We felt this was going to give us the best chance of success in 2016,' said Mr. Downey, noting there are benefits in having this

event near a holiday like Canada Day and using a venue as expansive as the Hoedown Tent for a first-year event was not necessarily a ?guarantee for success.?

Still, some Councillors were unconvinced, requesting the further report.

?I was expecting a report back to Council before we made any decision on this,? said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. ?The June 30 dance has been a tradition in Aurora for so many years and I don't think we want to mess with that and I hope that we wouldn't. We are trying to get the newer parts of Aurora into Town Park and it would be great to have a multicultural festival in Town Park and get the newer areas into the Park. That would be my choice, but not on June 30th.?

Councillors, particularly Paul Pirri, pondered whether the Magna Tent would even be in place after the company moves its headquarters to King, a possibility also considered by Mayor Dawe.

?I quite like the idea of having it in Town Park,? he said. ?I think the wonderful thing I have always expressed is a desire for us to make sure we do bring people to old Aurora and, at the same time, I think we need to bring people from the west side of Town to the east side of Town.?

Nevertheless, Councillor Abel was undeterred.

?The idea was if you can't bring Mohammed to the mountain, bring the mountain to Mohammed,? he said ?We're trying to engage the community.?