

LOCAL

The heat is on High on Ice

Winter festival needs promotion outside of community to draw tourism

TESSA HOLLOWAY
ALASKA HIGHWAY NEWS

What started out as a goal to cut costs by re-imagining the High On Ice festival has ended with a budget of \$10,700 more than last year.

City council passed the budget for next year's High On Ice festival with cuts to the commissioned sculptures, which included the ice slide at last year's event, but an extra \$15,000 needed to pay for a new coordinator position to organize the festival.

Until now the festival was organized by volunteers, but the massive workload proved too much for them to handle and a local coordinator will be hired this year.

That's the cost of creating an international event, said Councillor Lori Ackerman.

"We can't nickel and dime this to death. It's a quality of life aspect for our community and when you're trying to recruit people to our city that's something winter cities have to look at," she said, arguing the Calgary

Stampede organizers faced similar roadblocks in creating their event.

The final budget will cost the City \$98,400, with \$35,000 going to creating the ice, \$15,700 going to prizes, \$20,000 going to cover expenses of international carvers and the rest going towards the new coordinator position, other hosting costs and membership in the National Ice Carving Association (NICA).

International carver travel expenses and per diems will now be paid for through local sponsors, and no name change would be considered, according to the report.

But the motion was passed despite the objections of Mayor Bruce Lantz and Coun. Trevor Bolin, who said the budget was too big and the event wasn't delivering on the promised tourism.

"I keep hearing what a great tourism event this is and can be," said Lantz. "If we're only drawing five people from outside the area after more than five years I'm not so sure it's been successful in its goal."

Fort St. John Community Arts Council president, Lisa Bush, lauded council for maintaining most of the funding, telling reporters it will allow them to get on with preparing next year's event.

"Already NICA's been saying 'are you in?'" she said.

But she said comments about the lack of tourism generated by the events aren't fair because the City hasn't advertised the event outside of the community.

"They have never, ever promoted this out of town, so how are people supposed to know?" she said. "It's not a failure of the program, it's a failure of the marketing."

Last year all marketing took

place two weeks before the event, too late for people to make travel plans, and she said the arts council would be happy to take over the marketing as well.

She also said she didn't want there to be so many strings attached in how they have to spend the money, arguing they could do commissioned pieces while saving money in other areas of the event.

"We would like to be able to establish our own boundaries," she said after the meeting, but the city manager had told council the arts council wasn't interested in that.

Bush said there still is a need for better communication between the arts council and the City, despite the meeting that was previously held, though she said there had been improvements.

Loc

International ice carving worth the cost

Years of hard work will go to waste, says arts council

TESSA HOLLOWAY
ALASKA HIGHWAY NEWS

Carving the international competition out of High on Ice to save money would put years of hard work to waste, say representatives of the Fort St. John Community Arts Council.

Last week City council argued that the \$87,000 currently spent on the ice and snow carving portion of High On Ice is too much and passed a resolution calling for a "reinvention" of High On Ice as a purely local event.

However, Fort St. John Community Arts Council executive director Tara O'Donnell said the event is just taking off and increasingly drawing people from around the region to Fort St. John.

"I think it would be a mistake to walk away from it. To build it to this level and then step it down, that would be moving backwards," she said. "We're a smaller town in northern B.C. and to build something to the point where

we now have international participants, it's an amazing feat."

She said the response from international ice carvers about the National Ice Carvers Association sponsored event has been overwhelmingly positive, and some are already inquiring about next year's competition.

While she acknowledged the high cost, she said it brings money back to the city because people from the surrounding region come for the event.

"We're talking about cultural tourism, which is a buzz word these days, and that means revenue for our city," she said.

Mayor Bruce Lantz had also argued that there were too few international tourists coming to the event to warrant spending the money, but arts council president Lisa Bush said that's because they never tried.

"If they had advertised in any provincial or national tourist publication months in advance then you could say it didn't work," she said, but that didn't happen.

While some City councillors had proposed cutting funding but allowing the arts council to seek private sponsorships to fund the international competition, O'Donnell said fundraising already eats up too much of the organization's time, and they don't have the people to coordinate that.

"When you want to build something that is nationally and internationally recognized, you don't cut funding," said O'Donnell.

A change of direction would also put to waste months of work by the arts council, said Bush.

"We worked it out to the equivalent of a full time position for four months," she said. "And do you know what the City gave us for fees for that service? \$3,500."

Still, both were open to changes in the proposed budget, as well as looking at more partnerships to spread the work around either with the city or other groups, and there are plans to meet with council to decide the future of the festival.



ICE PREPARATION

JAN 13, 2009

Aleisha Hendry/AHN

As the sun sets over Centennial Park, Peter Vogelaar works on the ice welcome sign for the High on Ice winter festival this weekend. He and several others are working hard this week to turn the park into an icy wonderland in anticipation of the annual ice carving competition and other activities.



David L.

CARVIN' AWAY

NOV 24, 2009

Professional ice carver and former Fort St. John resident Peter Vogelaar teaches a handful of ice carving enthusiasts the tricks of the trade Saturday on the grounds of the North Peace Museum. Vogelaar also contributed two sculptures to the Santa Claus Parade Friday.