

UND, city partner to cancel Springfest

By [Anna Burleson](#) on Feb 2, 2015 at 8:18 p.m.

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After several booze-soaked decades, the annual outdoor festival marking an unofficial end to [UND's](#) spring semester, Springfest, has been canceled.

The event's usual organizers aren't going to host it, and city and university officials are requesting the availability of alcohol be severely restricted during the time when the festival is normally held, which is the weekend before finals week in May.

"We've gotten to the point where it's hard to stretch your imagination to find its redeeming value," UND President Robert Kelley said in reference to Springfest. "The students go into finals week, and they're not at their best. We have safety and security issues across the board, toxicity from abusive substances. This isn't good, so let's go in another direction."

Springfest, which is largely attended by college students, has been organized by [Rhombus Guys](#) pizzeria at University Park for the past few years and revolved largely around alcohol consumption for years.

Rhombus Guys co-owner Matt Winjum said the restaurant isn't going to host the event any longer due to its controversial nature. UND officials hope to instead organize several events throughout the year that don't involve alcohol.

Kelley and Mayor Mike Brown asked the [Grand Forks City Council](#) not to approve any special alcohol permits for the parks the weekend before UND finals through an [opinion piece](#) penned for the Herald. They also requested the Grand Forks Park District not allow any alcohol consumption in Grand Forks parks during the same time period, effectively canceling the event.

But Student Body President Tanner Franklin said regardless of whether or not alcohol permits are issued, students are still going to gather and drink that weekend. In the

four years he has attended UND, Franklin said he has always gathered with friends at house parties and never gone into the park.

"I understand they want to begin to take the alcohol consumption away from this day, but I don't think they're going to have much luck doing that unless they implement some sort of transition period," he said. "If they want to have concerts and festival and that's fine, but they're going to have to have alcohol, at least at first. It draws students."

Many in the neighborhood near University Park have gone so far as to put up fences to keep out wandering students.

Kelley said this is merely the first step in addressing some of those issues.

"You can't just throw a switch and make this all perfect," he said. "This is going to be a gradual progression over time."

Alternatives

Even though they were scheduled separately from any conversations about Springfest, Brown said concerts in May will provide a fun alternative for students.

Performers including country star Luke Bryan have concerts planned at the Ralph Engelstad Arena and Alerus Center May 7 and 8.

As time goes on, officials also are considering holding more events throughout the year instead of one annual festival

"Everybody has their own definition of what Springfest is; for some it's the event in the park for some it's drinking all weekend, and so we don't have a name for whatever we're going to do this May, we're just going to have alternative programming," UND Vice President for Student Affairs Lori Reesor said.

UND officials aren't worried about how the change might affect student recruitment.

"The students that that's what they're looking for, UND is not the right place, and we're not going to offer that culture," Reesor said. "It's not good for them, and it's not good for us."

While several city and UND officials told the Herald in January they didn't want to comment on the future of Springfest, Winjum said he and his business partner Arron Hendricks met with the group in October or November and were told of the aim to restrict alcohol permits, but that alternative events were a possibility.

"If that was the case, they asked that we be able to help them out in any manner with that and we said it would depend on what that event looked like," Winjum said.

Pete Haga, the community/government relations officer for Grand Forks, said officials are hoping to work with students to develop events they will want to attend at a variety of locations including downtown.

"We're looking at vibrancy 365 days a year and not 18 hours over one weekend," he said.

Eliminating the catalyst

This comes after Reesor, who also serves as co-chairwoman for the Community and Campus Committee to Reduce High-Risk Alcohol Use, announced her group would be looking at developing safe alternative activities for Springfest attendees at a university event last September.

Springfest requires attendees to be 21 and offers alcohol for purchase, but in recent years, city and campus police reported more students had moved away from the actual festival to outlying house parties, a sentiment Winjum agreed with.

The CCC was formed in 2012 to address high-risk alcohol consumption in the area and consists of 21 UND officials, business owners and city officials, according to its website.

While Springfest was definitely known for being more out of control years ago, with attendees going so far as to burn couches outside in 2001, Brown and Kelley said they chose to act this year because of the CCC's work on the issue.

"I think steadily over the years since that it's gotten more and more controlled," CCC co-chairman Ken Vein said. "It's been managed so well in fact that it appears that less people are actually going to the park and more people are going to the surrounding neighborhoods, and that's probably the bigger issue than what's happening in the park, but that was always a catalyst. It started there and the idea would be to eliminate the catalyst."

In September, Reesor also said the CCC would be looking at ways to eliminate extreme drink specials at local bars. To that end, Brown and Kelley also asked establishments to "work with us and not offer the kinds of drink specials that have often been offered during the weekend before finals," in their article.

In recent years, several downtown bars have opened early, advertised drink specials and offered free bus rides from downtown to University Park and back again.

Officials said there haven't been any conversations with bar owners, but they hope the owners will respond positively to the request.

"This is where I think the community has to get involved," Kelley said. "It's education. It's community expectation. It's putting a little pressure on individuals who perhaps benefit from other people's poor choices. It's a very multi-layered kind of thing and it's good that we're talking about it."

Sledsters, a bar in downtown Grand Forks, offered "all you can drink" tap beer and rail drink wristbands for \$12 in 2013 according to its Facebook page, but manager Ryan Spicer said the bar had no such plans to do so this coming May.

"We don't need to do that," he said. "They're going to be here anyway."

Last spring, Franklin started working on a plan that would have moved the event downtown and allowed for underage attendees, but Brown said downtown wasn't considered as an option because they're trying to keep the focus off of alcohol consumption.

"You're talking to businesses telling them to not do the specials that they've typically done in the past, and that's not a huge piece of Springfest, but it's still there," Franklin said. "It would take something larger than that to shift the culture that has been created over the last 10 to 15 years, and I'm not sure exactly what is going to do that."

Reesor said there are plans to offer programming on the Friday and Saturday of what would normally be Springfest, but what exactly that will be hasn't been decided yet.

Changing the culture

Reesor said this is the beginning of a collaboration between the university and city to change the culture of drinking — a culture that has proven fatal at another regional campus.

In December, a Bemidji State University student who showed signs of intoxication died of hypothermia after leaving a house party, and authorities said alcohol may have been involved when another student at the same college was found outside in below-freezing temperatures a month later.

The decision to request this of the City Council and Park District was meant to be a proactive step.

"Our thoughts were we didn't want to wait for a death to occur and then react it," Vein said.

Winjum said the event wasn't very profitable due to poor attendance in recent years, so the decision to comply with the CCC and UND was simple.

"We were on the fence about it because for us there is a lot of risk involved with it, and there seems to be some negativity behind the event almost every year, which inevitably we're tied to," he said.

About 36 percent of UND students surveyed had engaged in binge drinking in the past two weeks according to UND's 2010 National College Health Assessment survey, which is developed by the American College Health Association.

"We're not going to get them all, and we know prohibition doesn't work and 'just say no' doesn't work," Kelley said. "We've tried all these things over time. I think what we've got to do is de-emphasize and redirect."

North Dakota has the highest ratio of bars to people in the country according to 2011 census data, and while the most recent North Dakota State Epidemiological Outcomes Workgroup shows the number of students drinking at least six alcoholic beverages per week is decreasing, officials said it isn't enough.

"It's a different level of drinking than what it used to be," Reesor said.

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