

Changing the Fall Fest Paradigm

To put it mildly, attendance at this year's Fall Fest was disappointing. Despite Dance Committee planning, organizing and running a top notch dance event, dancers stayed away in droves. As Dance Committee has reported, only 96 dancers attended Fall Fest 2017. The Food Bank Dance in Prescott two weeks later attracted nearly 50% more dancers than Fall Fest did and it was a Basic/Mainstream Dance with easy rounds, no vendors and an out-of-town location.

Fall Fest would have incurred a significant deficit had it not been for the Share the Wealth draws. We are now depending on gambling to keep the dance in the black.

As originally conceived, Fall Fest was supposed to be a significant event in Eastern Ontario's dance calendar. Within living memory, it was an eagerly anticipated afternoon and evening dance featuring: high calibre out-of-town Callers and Cuers; square and round dance workshops; assorted vendors; and lots and lots of dancers.

Over the years, as attendance dropped, the dance was downgraded. Out-of-town Dance Leaders were replaced with local talent, afternoon workshops were cancelled and the evening dance was moved to the afternoon. And for a couple of years the dance was cancelled, being brought back only at the request of this Council. But attendance has continued to slip to the point where we now need to make some serious decisions about the dance's future. In light of the manifest disinterest of the dancing community we should either cancel the dance outright or find a way to renew interest in the dance.

Cancelling the dance is probably the easier of the two options, but that doesn't make it the right choice. In fact, I would argue that it is the wrong choice under present circumstances. Let me explain.

Over the past few years we have lost a number of experienced and very talented Callers and Cuers. On the square dance side we have recruited several new Callers who are working hard to improve their Calling skills. On the round dance side, we have not been as successful, but Capital Carousels has been doing its best to bring in outside cueing talent on a regular basis.

Nevertheless, on a week-to-week basis, most of our square dancers are dancing to inexperienced Callers while the dancing options for round dancers are much more limited than they were just a few years ago. As a result, dancing skills are not all they should be, and the situation will only get worse as some of our senior dance leaders retire.

All clubs at all levels have an interest in improving dancing skills. Better dancing skills provide better qualified angels for all clubs and make it easier for dancers to progress to the next level. Better dancing skills also reduce dancer frustration which in turn encourages dancer retention. Dancing to higher level dance leaders can also improve the skills of our local dance leaders.

Fall Fest has the potential to provide our dancers with the opportunity to improve their dancing skills by giving them the opportunity to dance to international level dance leaders. But for this to happen, we need a budget for the dance that will permit us to hire the talent and rent the dance halls required to put on a world class dance event.

This cannot be done on the basis of ticket or ribbon sales.

The major problem with trying to build a budget on such a basis is that there is no way of reliably predicting in advance how many tickets will be sold. In fact the final sales figure will usually not be known until after the dance has been held.

Furthermore, the current system provides no incentive for clubs to encourage the sale of Fall Fest ribbons. Some clubs strongly support Fall Fest and do their best to encourage their dancers to attend, while others are less supportive. Only 16 clubs of 30 were represented at Fall Fest 2017 and of these, six had only 1 or 2 dancers present. (Interestingly, two dancers signed in for a club that no longer exists!) Only three clubs, Meri Squares, Mississippi Squares and Village Squares had dancers in the double digits (14, 19 and 12 respectively). And with dancers attending from Kingston, Cornwall and Pembroke, it would appear that distance was not a determining factor.

Of course, with Council's support, we could simply establish a budget for an enhanced Fall Fest next year and take the risk of running a significant deficit. Another alternative would be to change the funding formula for the dance while at the same time increasing all clubs' vested interests in promoting and supporting Fall Fest.

For example, we could fund Fall Fest through a compulsory levy on all clubs whose dance styles and levels are included in the dance syllabus for the event. Let's call these Candidate Clubs

The budget for the dance would be determined by Dance Committee and would take into account the estimated cost of:

- hiring suitable Dance Leaders;
- renting a higher end dance hall;
- providing suitable refreshments; and
- printing ribbons

The budget would then be used to establish a levy for all Candidate Clubs based on the number of people who dance with each club on a regular basis.

EOSARDA would provide each club with a supply of dance ribbons for the club to sell at whatever price it chooses. All revenues from the sale of ribbons would be retained by the club.

The term "levy" seems to have spooked many people, so let's put this in context. According to Barb's report, it cost \$1,100 to put on Fall Fest 2017. Barbara has also reported that we have approximately 740 square and round dancers registered with EOSARDA. That would put the per dancer levy for this year's Fall Fest at \$1.48 per dancer. So for a club of 10 dancers the levy would have been \$14.80, less than the cost of 2 ribbons.

If we were to increase the budget for 2018 to \$2,000, the levy would be \$2.96 per dancer. So for every 10 dancers the levy would be \$29.60. Selling just 5 ribbons at \$10 each would give a club a profit of \$20.40 and we would have potentially 300 + dancers at the dance. Whether they all showed up or not, we would have the budget to put on a really great dance!

This is just one way in which Fall Fest could be retained and rejuvenated. Would it work? Would dances come back in sufficient numbers to justify the hard work and expense involved in putting on

a world class dance event?

I don't know, but I think that it worth trying. The alternative is to for Fall Fest to join the ever increasing ranks of deceased dances.

What do you think?