

HIGHLAND GAMES AND SCOTTISH FESTIVAL

Festival season means boom for businesses

BY JAIME MYSLIK

WELLINGTON COUNTY – Summer has long been a time for outdoor festivals, weekend entertainment and community fun.

But festivals are more than just an adventure for weekend warriors, they are a source of significant tourism dollars for towns throughout Ontario.

The festival business is booming, and Wellington County is benefiting.

Annually, Ontario festivals bring in $2.38 billion and though many county festivals are not-for-profit, local businesses see a chunk of these tourism dollars.

"The larger festivals certainly attract tourists from outside of the local community, which is always great for the economy, whether they are out visiting restaurants or staying in hotels or [bed and breakfasts] that sort of thing," said Kathrin Delutis, CEO of Festivals and Events Ontario.

Delutis said in many cases local businesses work in partnership with festivals to best capitalize on tourist traffic.

"A really good example is when a festival not only has their activity taking place on specific grounds or in a park but they engage the business community by also having additional ... entertainment," she said.

This is a focus of the Fergus Scottish Festival and Highland Games, a three-day festival celebrating everything Scottish that welcomes 15,000 to 20,000 visitors annually.

Though it has been a challenge to engage downtown Fergus businesses since the festival moved from Victoria Park to the Centre Wellington Community Sportsplex, president David Radley said the festival hasn't stopped trying.

"Thursday night last year we actually closed [St. Andrews Street] down so it became much more a pedestrian thoroughfare and we're kind of hoping with that the downtown merchants will use that to kind of attract people," he said.

Also, throughout the weekend Radley said festival performers make appearances in downtown bars and pubs.

"We split the cost with [the bars and pubs] ... we have most of the acts that we have up at the festival ... perform at each of the bars downtown, so that brings in a lot of business," he said.

"They all see it as a tremendous weekend and the Celtic music goes over very well in the Fergus area. There's still a lot of Scottish background people and you get some pretty good acts down there."

To draw even more people to the downtown core, Radley said the festival partners with the Fergus BIA to offer shuttle buses to transport people from the sportsplex to downtown Fergus.



While the festival business is growing Delutis said the key to a successful event is volunteer and community engagement.

"Whether it's a tourism drawn festival or not, it needs the community support, whether that's municipal support to help with things such as road closures, use of parks, equipment, facilities, that sort of thing, or even more importantly volunteers," she said.

PHOTOS: P.26: HELEN MICHEL; P.27 DAN MCCRACKEN

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Community support is the backbone of the Mount Forest Fireworks Festival.

Main Street in Mount Forest has closed for the third weekend in July for the past 16 years for the community festival and car show. This year will be no different.

"The township is a great partner and we request permission to close the road for the festival and for 17 years they've approved it," said Mount Forest and Area Chamber of Commerce president David Sharpe.

The festival is a three-day event featuring a demolition derby, classic car show, local entertainment, kids activities and, of course, fireworks.

"From our perspective, we're getting people into town and hoping the businesses can capitalize on them," Sharpe said.

He added many of the businesses offer sidewalk sales or special coupons during the Fireworks Festival.

Sharpe said that last year Youngsters on Main, a children's clothing store in Mount Forest, had a unique marketing idea for the festival.

"Their lead promotion was headphones for babies," he said. "You know they go to the fireworks, it's too loud, they've got their earmuff headphones as part of their lead promotion for the weekend."

Also, with the car show closing down Main Street, Sharpe said the stores generally see increased foot traffic.

"There's all kinds of little things that can spin off and our focus is on making sure the people come and they're getting entertained and we're hoping the businesses kind of use their own creativity and their own skills to capitalize," Sharpe said.

He added the goal is for some of the 20,000 annual festival-goers to return to businesses in Mount Forest.

"Showing off the Main Street is definitely the priority where people are walking around," Sharpe said. "Maybe they're eating their hotdogs and fries and ice cream or looking at the cars ... maybe they take notice of the businesses that we do have in our downtown and that might be a reason to return again."

Wellington North's economic development officer Dale Small said one of the challenges festivals experience is businesses asking how tourism traffic is actually impacting their individual business.

"Not all of these events support all of the businesses and therefore there are probably economic negatives that happen to those businesses," Small said. "The really good ones step up and say 'you know what? It's great for the community and yes, maybe it's not all that great for my business on that day, but it's a great event for the community and I need to support it.'

"And those are the type of community-minded businesses that are so awesome to have in your community."

Sharpe gave an example of one such business.

"Often we hear from our business Meat the Butcher that the Saturday (is) absolutely dead for him, but the days leading up and the weeks and months later he gets people coming back saying, 'Oh I noticed you at the Fireworks Festival,'" Sharpe said. "There's people in town that [are] having all kinds of family over so

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DAVID SHARPE, PRESIDENT, MOUNT FOREST AND AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE



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they prepare the days ahead and they stock up as well."

Engaging the local business community is also a priority for the Fergus Scottish Festival and Highland Games.

For example, Ron Wilkin Jewellers creates all the festival's trophies, the Goofie Newfie runs the beer tent on the festival grounds and Bentley Tea House offers the tea tent at the sportsplex.

"It was started as a community event in 1946 and we've tried to keep it that way," Radley said. "The whole idea of the festival is to ... showcase a bit of the Scottish culture and we're a non-profit organization, we're not out to make big money and ... we feel that ... we're an integral part of the community...

"We could do it cheaper sometimes, but we use the local staples."

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> DEB DALZIEL,
> CENTRE WELLINGTON TOURISM AND DESTINATION COORDINATOR

Centre Wellington tourism and destination coordinator Deb Dalziel explained the tourism traffic festivals create is vital to the local economy.

"What's really important to remember is when tourism dollars arrive in your town it's a new dollar, it's not a recycled dollar," Dalziel said. "The trickle-down effect is really quite impactful because ... they've come in, they're leaving their economic spin on the community and they're driving away again."

There are many festivals and events held throughout Wellington County all year.

For a full list of what the county has to offer visit wellington.ca/en/2017festivalsguide.asp.

The Mount Forest Fireworks Festival is scheduled for July 14 to 16 and the Fergus Scottish Festival and Highland Games will take place Aug. 11 to 13.

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