

Subject: A Relook at The Food & Wine Festival
January 3, 2024

Sometime during my first term as mayor, I was invited to a meeting at the Lakeside Restaurant, where hospitality and food service folks had gathered, along with Chamber of Commerce representatives. Folks from outside Highlands and Eleven Events were also there. I recall the meeting took place in late summer.

The agenda for the meeting was revitalizing the floundering *Taste of Highlands*. Over the years, this traditional fall event has lost its luster and appeal. I recalled that the *Taste of Highlands* event occurred in late spring. It involved a large tent being erected in front of the Highlands Food Store. There was always a great band, and local restaurants had tables set up that featured their best dishes. Participants paid for a ticket to enter the tent and enjoy the fun. I remember that, over the years, local restaurants lost enthusiasm about participating since they had to close their restaurants, set up operations at this one location, and lose money.

At this meeting at Lakeside, representatives from Eleven Events presented their distinguished credentials for promoting and managing community events and celebrations at major venues. They proposed a makeover of the Taste of Highlands. Now, it would become the *Highlands Food and Wine Festival*. These professionals had several new ideas about how to create a reinvigorated event. There would now be multiple events over a period of a three-day weekend.

What really got my attention from the presentation was a proposal to close Main Street for a major music, eating, and drinking event. I recall urging the planners to get requests to the board about staging multiple events, especially closing Main Street.

And that it had to be a non-profit event.

The rest is history; the board did approve the closing of Main Street for the Main Event, the use of a large tent in the park for the Grand Tasting and Sunday Brunch, and the Trucking Event. To the organizers' credit, it rejuvenated the event, and there have been many successes over the years.

But there are now emerging concerns. First, the ticket prices have been very high. Until recently, the tickets would go on sale and sold out within seconds. Some area residents who were ready to buy were frustrated by being blocked from purchasing. Second, a number of residents in recent weeks have expressed concerns about whether the town actually needs such an event given the large number of tourists coming to the town, even throughout the fall and up until Christmas.

I am not advocating the elimination of this festival, but almost a decade ago, it might be time to reevaluate. For instance, other communities have similar festivals. Asheville, for example, has *Chow Chow*. Their festival also has very high-priced tickets to events, but also there are events that are more open to the public with very low-ticket prices. What about the Clayton Crawl? Let me put forth some ideas.

First, if things remain the same, then the event's name could be changed to the Highlands Music Festival. The music is the headline, not the small portions of food and wine. Second, organizers might want to stage some events at the venue where the Bear Shadow takes place. Maybe closing the downtown street is not the best place for a major music event. Third, consider making it a week-long event with some of these events perhaps. For instance, have a chef prepare a meal for the Tuesday night Community Table. Revive the chili cook off contest. We had the *King of the Mountain Chief's Challenge*, for three years, that showcased our area chiefs in a food cooking contest against outside chefs. It was a huge success, and our great Highlands chefs won all three years. Maybe these types of events could be a part of a week-long festival. And finally, bring back the *Taste of Highlands* event. Have a large tent at the park and invite restaurants to serve their signature dishes. Instead of expecting them to pay for the privilege, have the chamber or another group sponsor the event and pay the restaurants.

These are just the musings of a "seasoned" mayor, but certainly food for thought.