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Downturn Forces Communities to Put Festivals on Hold; Cutbacks at Fire-Ant Bash

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By ELLEN GAMERMAN and JIM CARLTON

The Ice Spectacular had been a February tradition in Utica, Mich., but this weekend there were no ice sculptures, no carriage rides, no hot cocoa and no yodeling lessons.

After contacting dozens of local car dealerships, restaurants, banks and other businesses in recent weeks, volunteer fund-raisers for the festival came up with just two sponsors. Mayor Jacqueline Noonan called off the event, which she estimates brings more than 5,000 visitors to the city, pop. 4,577. "It just broke my heart to cancel," says Ms. Noonan, who last year helped sponsor an ice sculpture of a seal with a ball on its nose.



Hard times force towns to cancel festivals.

Wizard of Oz Festival means a local Holiday Inn Express will no longer host autograph signings by some of the last surviving actors who played the Munchkins. "The kids would follow them in the breakfast room," says manager Dave Sassanella. "I hate to see this show leave."

Organizers of the 27-year-old festival -- billed as the largest in the world based on the classic 1939 movie -- say the bad economy prompted them to shutter the event, along with "the advancing age" of those who played the Munchkins. At the last festival, in September, fans got to meet three Munchkins, two "MBMs," or "Munchkins by marriage," and an actor who played one of the evil monkeys. "He was a winged monkey, but didn't fly in the movie," says Mary Paschen, co-director of the festival.

Old Glasses

Organizers of this past weekend's Pecan, Wine & Antique Festival in Camp Verde, Ariz., defrayed costs by giving festival-goers commemorative glasses that say "2002," among other years, instead of investing in new ones for 2009. "That's saving us \$4,500 right there," says Parks and Recreation Director Lynda Moore, who also found a sponsor to provide a free hotel room for the fruit and nut expert who judged the pecan contest.

After seeing other local fund-raising donations fall as much as 50% in Crescent City, Calif., organizers of the town's Aleutian Goose Festival decided not to put on the roughly \$30,000 event in March -- canceling until next year. The festival has been held since 2003 to celebrate the resurgence of the once-endangered Aleutian Cackling Goose, which stops off in Northern California before migrating to the Aleutian Islands. Upwards of 200 tourists flock to the festival to partake in workshops, field trips and a goose poetry contest for kids. "They mate for life...They fly with their wife," read one entry.

Across the country, festivals that give communities a sense of pride -- and bring crowds to towns that rarely attract visitors otherwise -- are getting crushed by the economic crisis. Events are being canceled or downsized as local governments, community groups and corporate sponsors pull back their dollars.

The angst is palpable in Porter County, Ind., where cancellation of this year's Indiana

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Light of Christ Abounds in Helon Petyre Festival

When the Helon Petyre festival in Ojai, Calif., was called off late last year, in part because of budget concerns, local poet Tree Bernstein helped form a separate group to revive the event. The original festival drew about 700 people to an amphitheater in May, and featured nationally known poets. Ms. Bernstein plans to reduce costs by choosing less expensive venues and focusing on regional talent. She's asked someone from her yoga class to do a reading with his men's group.



The Arts Need Better



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The decision to cancel last month's Mesilla Valley Balloon Rally in Las Cruces, N.M., was so difficult that one board member quit in protest, says rally co-chairwoman Patti Havstad. Ms. Havstad says if the \$50,000 hot-air balloon event had gone on as planned, it would have racked up a \$10,000 debt that she and other volunteers would have had to cover. Some people are still unhappy: Ms. Havstad was grocery shopping recently when a balloon-lover stopped her to register dismay.

Larger events are being called off too, such as the Detroit Belle Isle Grand Prix car race, which drew 100,000 fans last year, according to event chairman Bud Denker, senior vice president of Penske Corp. "With the issues of raising money this year, could we have the same kind of amenities and feel this year? I just didn't want to risk that," he says. If the economy improves, he hopes to bring the event back next year.

The Krewe of Aquila, which has held a Mardi Gras parade in a New Orleans suburb every year since 1976, had already invested \$60,000 in floats and was working on elaborate costumes when the social group called off the parade for this year. The krewe, based in Metairie, La., couldn't convince enough people to spend roughly \$300 for a membership whose privileges include riding on a float and tossing beads to the crowd.

Krewe captain Adam Mehn says he plans to repay members who had already paid their dues, and he hopes to recoup the cost of the floats through bingo nights. He'll also resell the krewe's beads. "We can make a markup on that and use it to pay the bills," he says.

Fire Ant Festival

Other festival planners are making cutbacks. At next month's Fire Ant Festival in Ashburn, Ga., a 14-year-old celebration named for the region's ubiquitous insect, organizer Shelley Zorn is saving \$1,500 by shaving five minutes off the fireworks show and nixing plans for a dog act.

Ms. Zorn helps promotes the festival for months, with chocolate-covered fire ants and events such as a fire-ant calling contest. She's hoping sales of T-shirts, featuring an ant dressed like James Bond, will bolster this year's budget.

Downsized festivals are attracting fewer people, says Virgil Klunder, executive director of Pocket Pets. His company sets up booths at festivals and sells sugar gliders -- small animals commonly mistaken for flying squirrels. Mr. Klunder says sales of the creatures are off at least 10% from last year, even though crowds still watch the show at his booth featuring sugar gliders doing flips and jumping into his pocket.

Steve Schmader, president of the Boise, Idaho-based International Festivals & Events Association, says when festivals are canceled for a year, they may disappear for good because volunteers scatter and sponsors lose interest. "It's so important for these communities not to risk losing these events, which become often the brand for a community," he says.

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