Bonne Fête supersedes FestForAll

By DEANN SMITH
Advocate staff writer

Local tourism officials say FestForAll won't be held this May because of Bonne Fête, and may not ever be held again.

Tourism Director Leon Maisel said his staff couldn't handle the demands of both FestForAll and Bonne Fête, which was held earlier this month to mark the 300th anniversary of French explorers discovering Baton Rouge.

"We felt it would be just too taxing on our staff and resources to come up with another festival in May," Maisel said Wednesday.

Maisel said he would like to see FestForAll merged into Bonne Fête, if Bonne Fête becomes an annual event, as he hopes it does.

The bureau spent $25,000 on FestForAll last year and received a $15,000 grant from Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge. Bureau funds that would have usually been used for FestForAll instead went into promoting Bonne Fête, Maisel said.

Maisel said he told board members last spring that the bureau wouldn't hold FestForAll in 1999, but said the matter didn't come before the board for approval. FestForAll is a weekend event traditionally held in the spring.

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— Tourism Director Leon Maisel

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FestForAll

spring to promote arts and crafts. Recently food and music has also been featured.

The festival was started by the predecessor to the Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge, but the Baton Rouge Area Convention and Visitors Bureau has sponsored it in recent years.

Some people say they will miss the festival this year and hope it doesn't completely vanish.

Hermann "Buck" Moyse, interim executive director of the arts council, said in a written statement Thursday that he will miss FestForAll this year. But he added that the council's monthly arts market and other events offer opportunities to showcase artists and craftsmen.

Moyse also said the arts council is exploring offering an arts festival.

"There have been ongoing discussions at the arts council regarding creating an arts festival that takes the art component of FestForAll and expands it," Moyse said.

B.B. "Ben" Taylor III, a local Realtor who as a member of the original arts council fought for the group to keep sponsorship of FestForAll, said he would like to see the arts council or another organization take over the event again and maintain it as separate from Bonne Fête.

Taylor said the event should return to focusing on arts.

"Keep the arts part intact and negate the beer-bust part," Taylor said Thursday.

Hal Melkild, director of operations for AV Express, which provides sound and stage lighting at events, including FestForAll, said he doesn't mind killing FestForAll as long as it's merged with Bonne Fête and local event producers have an opportunity to bid on it.

"I wouldn't have a problem with FestForAll disappearing as long as it was part of a yearly Bonne Fête," he said.

Melkild said local artists and craftsmen should have visible roles in an annual Bonne Fête, including a stage for local talent.

Whether the bureau will host FestForAll again is up in the air.

Maisel said he thinks it's time for the bureau to stop organizing and overseeing festivals. He said he would recommend the board not sponsor FestForAll in the future, but said it's the board's decision.

"I don't have the authority to say, 'We can't ever do it again,'" Maisel said.

The bureau gave money and provided staff workers for Bonne Fête, but didn't run it. That was left to a private, nonprofit group.

The bureau's mission is to promote tourism, which must be the focus of its spending, Maisel said.

"I don't see us doing a lot of special events anymore unless they are visitor-driven, and FestForAll was basically a community event," Maisel said. "Bonne Fête has proven to be a visitor event."

CVB board members Donna Mayeux and Jensen Holliday, who served as Bonne Fête chairpersons, agreed.

They said it was impossible for the bureau to sponsor FestForAll this year. They said if Bonne Fête becomes an annual event, the arts portion of FestForAll would be highlighted during Bonne Fête.

Rick Smith, executive director of the Greater Baton Rouge Hotel/Motel Association and a CVB board member, said hotel and motel occupancy hasn't been affected by FestForAll.

But he added that he likes FestForAll and hates to see the event abandoned.

"It's a community festival. It's a shame, but maybe it's time for a change," Smith said.