

Riverfest moving downtown

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Beloit Riverfest will be back for its 25th anniversary in 2012, but the five-day celebration will not be returning to its usual home.

Rather than host the bash at Riverside Park festival organizers are moving the event downstream to the grassy area near the Beloit Transit System transfer station on Shirland Avenue, a site often referred to as the River Bend area.

The relocation of Riverfest isn't something organizers wanted, said event board vice president Stephanie West. The move was mandated by the Wisconsin Department of Transportation due to construction closure of the Henry Avenue bridge. Organizers said, with Riverside Park out of the picture, the new, larger venue is the next best bet.

The new location is bordered by Shirland Avenue to the south and the Beloit Post Office to the north. Though residents may be less familiar with this stretch of town than the more prominent Riverside Park, the area will actually afford organizers an additional 27,000 square feet of space, a helpful feature for squeezing in rides, food vendors and musical acts, said Riverfest Board President Duane Drevdahl.

Furthermore, the new locale should benefit downtown retailers and restaurants, he said.

Of course, Riverfest organizers would prefer keeping the shindig at Riverside Park. But that simply isn't an option in 2012, Drevdahl and West said.

For safety reasons largely related to the high number of pedestrians present during Riverfest, transportation officials have for years required the closure of Highway 51 from Portland Avenue to Henry Avenue during the blowout. This year, those officials declared that closing Highway 51 while the Henry Avenue bridge was simultaneously closed would place an unacceptable crimp on Beloit's traffic flow, Drevdahl and West said.

"It's beyond the city," Drevdahl said.

A DOT spokesperson could not confirm or deny that account as of press deadline, but said he would follow up with the Beloit Daily News.

Riverfest planners were first made aware of the possible forced move when construction of the Henry Avenue bridge began, West said. Several alternatives were explored before settling on the off-Shirland

site.

Other options included Leeson Park, Telfer Park and even Preservation Park in the Town of the Beloit, Drevdahl said. But organizers decided against moving Riverfest away from Beloit or away from the Rock River.

“Taking it outside of town or anywhere else outside the heartbeat of Beloit wouldn’t have felt right,” he said.

“It is Riverfest” after all, West said, noting that the river runs right under the Shirland Avenue Bridge. “It just seemed like a good fit.”

With any change in plans of this scale comes a logistics headache, Drevdahl noted. Details had to be rearranged with Beloit’s public safety departments. Parking, electricity access, bathrooms and other amenities had to be sorted out all over.

Organizers are currently working with the City of South Beloit to allow parking in the nearby, old Freeman Shoes lot. There is ample parking downtown and buses are another option, Drevdahl said.

Water Street will be closed. The decision to possibly closing Shirland Avenue during the event has not yet been made, Drevdahl said.

Though moving Riverfest from its long-established home is less than ideal, organizers worked hard to come up with a suitable solution, he and West said. And in the end, both individuals believe Riverfest 2012 will be better than ever.

The festival, which is scheduled to run Wednesday, June 27 to Sunday, July 1, will feature free admission and a packed lineup of musical entertainment as well as a massive midway of rides.

Organizers are also planning to expand Riverfest Idol, a popular singing competition modeled after American Idol. More contestants will be allowed to participate this year, Drevdahl said, and the grand prize will be increased to \$2,012.

The Riverfest committee is also seeking ways to make the event more family-friendly. Daytime entertainment such as dance groups and BMX bike riders are being explored, West said.

