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BIFF looking at mostly virtual film fest

By HILLARY GAVAN Senior staff writer

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Gerard

Photo provided

BELOIT — In light of COVID-19 numbers in the county, the Beloit International Film Festival (BIFF) will celebrate its ‘sweet 16’ birthday virtually with the possibility for a few drive-in movies.

The 16th Annual BIFF will run Feb. 19–28. The films to be featured this year will be announced this week and will include around 40 feature length films and around 60 short films, according to BIFF Executive Director Greg Gerard.

The BIFF board of directors recently voted unanimously to suspend normal operations and commit to a virtual festival after conferring with local and regional health organizations and civic authorities such as the Reopen Rock County Task Force, the City of Beloit, and a number of area business operators. Gerard said downtown business operators and venue hosts were understanding about the decision.

BIFF going virtual will have a significant economic impact for the area, according to information from Visit Beloit Chief Executive Officer Celestino Ruffini.



Ruffini explained \$160 is the amount of spending by someone on the average overnight trip in the area. In 2020, there were 368 rooms sold on average during the Friday and Saturday of BIFF, which would account for a total of \$58,880 per night of visitor spending, or \$235,520 the two weekends alone. Ruffini noted some of these rooms could have been rented for occasions other than BIFF.

In addition, the average amount spent by a person spending the day in Beloit for BIFF is around \$71.

Ruffini estimates at least a \$250,000 to \$500,000 economic income impact for tourism businesses by not having a live festival.

However, Ruffini said the virtual festival could offer a unique opportunity to grow the audience, and hopefully by next year, bring more people into Beloit.

BIFF will be using the Shift72 platform out of New Zealand, one of the big companies offering online management for major film festivals.

Outdoor drive-in content is being considered, and will likely be a blend of BIFF 2021 competition films, and a number of G rated major motion picture company favorites for families to enjoy. Gerard said he is still talking with sponsors, but is hoping to get the three flagship film events—the Classic Movie, Silent Film Showcase and the BIFF Sing-along—as drive-in movie events.

“I’ll be working with the Downtown Beloit Association to take inventory of what locations might work for drive-ins. We are going to figure this out and make it interesting for people and have some extra fun surprises along the way,” Gerard said.

Gerard said he wants to keep some downtown presence to help encourage curbside pickup at local restaurants and continued support for local business.

Other online opportunities may include Q&As with filmmakers, workshops with a variety of industry professionals, discussion panels and virtual lounge attractions. This year's reveal event, set for the first week of February, could either be a large Zoom meeting or Facebook live event. The event is traditionally when people gather for snacks, learn about the films and pick up their program booklets.

Gerard said the good news is BIFF had lots of time to prepare, practice and research virtual as well drive-in events.

For example, it's hosting its 11th drive-in movie this Saturday at 6 p.m. at Messiah Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1531 Townline Ave., when it shows "The Santa Clause 2" with Tim Allen. The parking lot will open at 5:15 p.m. The free event has limited seating.

Gerard said he's also spoken with executive directors at other film festivals around the country and how they have made virtual events successful.

Hillary Gavan

