‘Everything Just Clicked’ At National Folk Festival; Attendance Estimated At 153K

Sep 19, 2019 by Bethany Hooper

SALISBURY – Salisbury officials estimate that more than 153,000 people attended this year’s National Folk Festival, a significant increase from last year’s inaugural event.

In a statement issued last Friday, Salisbury Mayor Jake Day reported that the city’s information services department calculated a total of 153,911 attendees – more than double the previous year’s figures – throughout the weekend.

“We expected to see larger crowds this year, and we certainly did,” Day said. “It’s a wonderful feeling. Downtown has never been so alive.”

The 79th annual National Folk Festival return for the second year of a three-year residency in downtown Salisbury from Sept. 6-8. The festival – a free, outdoor event produced by the National Council for the Traditional Arts – celebrates arts, culture and heritage through live performances, workshops, demonstrations, children’s activities and more.

For the second year, the city deployed an enterprise mesh Wi-Fi system, which covered the footprint of the festival. Attendance figures are determined by counting the number of Wi-Fi enabled devices inside the coverage area over the three days of the festival, and then applying a standard deviation formula which accounts for children and people without Wi-Fi devices.

Once the formula has been applied, analysts then subtract the number of unique devices which had been logged as present inside the footprint in the three weeks prior to the festival.

Information Services Director Bill Garrett noted a significant increase in traffic beyond what was seen in the three-week period leading up to the festival.
“It’s primarily social media driven,” Garrett said in a statement. “Streaming to sites like Facebook comprises a large portion of the bandwidth increase, which was almost 2,500% higher over the weekend of the Festival than it was in the previous 3 weeks.”

City officials also noted the success of the festival’s recycling, composting and water conservation efforts and reported gross sales of $218,716, merchandise sales of $37,111 and donations of $40,790.

Donations were collected by volunteers on the Bucket Brigade, which circulates throughout the crowd seeking contributions to ensure the festival remains free for attendees. According to officials with the festival, donations from the crowd this year more than doubled.

“Our ‘Brigadiers’ bring a great deal of passion and commitment to the Folk Festival,” said Bucket Brigade Coordinator Shawna Kearsley. “They are energetic and outgoing, and they remind audience members that a ‘drop in the bucket’ makes the festival free and possible for all to enjoy. This year we collected $40,790.79, exceeding our 2019 goal. Next year we plan to do even better.”

According to the press release, the festival briefly ran out of local craft and Maryland-brewed brews. By mid-afternoon, organizer began calling for more beer to be delivered to the festival.

Lora Bottinelli, Director of the National Council for the Traditional Arts, expressed her satisfaction with the event.

“The 79th National Folk Festival was a resounding success by any and every measure,” she said in a statement. “Our artists delivered outstanding performances, sharing their cultural traditions from across America and beyond. This year’s attendance far exceeded expectations and launched Salisbury to new heights in its continued cultural renewal.”

In an interview this week, Caroline O’Hare, local manager for the National Folk Festival, praised the efforts of organizers and volunteers to make this year’s event a success.

“I’m so incredibly proud of not only the community but the state,” she said. “We came together to work so hard to make this a success … It was bigger and better than I could have ever imagined it.”

O’Hare said turnout for this year’s festival was an improvement from last year’s event, which attracted more than 60,000 people despite rainy conditions. She said nice weather and improved public awareness played a large role in its success last weekend.

“This was the festival I always knew it could be,” she said. “Last year, we battled weather and awareness. This year everything just clicked.”

O’Hare noted that organizers will once again work with Business, Economic and Community Outreach Network (BEACON) at Salisbury University’s Franklin P. Perdue School of Business to complete an economic impact study of the festival. Throughout the weekend, between 20 and 25 surveyors canvassed the festival’s footprint to gather information from attendees.

“Last year we got the results a few months later,” she said. “I’m hoping we can get those sooner this year.”

O’Hare added that this year’s festival featured participants and attendees of various ages, races and backgrounds.

“I loved seeing the diversity of not only the performers, but the crowd that came together …,” she said. “It’s a beautiful celebration of America, which is what the festival is about.”
About The Author: Bethany Hooper

Bethany Hooper has been with The Dispatch since 2016. She currently covers various general stories. Hooper graduated from Stephen Decatur High School in 2012 and the University of Maryland in 2016, where she completed double majors in journalism and economics.

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