Information: Anna Bradford, Director of Culture, received a letter on November 23, 2010 from Tara Crugnale, a member of the Board of Directors of the Festival of Friends. The letter outlines the Festival Board’s intent to relocate the Festival of Friends from Gage Park to the Ancaster Fairgrounds, effective 2011. The primary reason that the Board has cited for its decision is the incompatibility of their plans to continue to grow the Festival with the residential nature of the neighbourhood surrounding Gage Park. The letter is attached as Appendix A to Report CS11013.

Background: The Festival of Friends was launched in 1976 as a free, grass roots arts festival based in Gage Park featuring the work of local artisans and musicians.

Increased municipal and federal funding support during the 1980’s allowed Festival of Friends to expand its programming. During this period of expansion, the Festival of Friends embraced a Canadian focussed programming philosophy while showcasing the many diverse cultures that called Canada home. The combination allowed Festival of Friends to grow in popularity and develop a reputation as one of Hamilton’s signature summer events.

During the 1990s, a range of factors required the Festival of Friends to investigate ways to invigorate the Festival and maintain its popularity. The organization began to look at
ways to leverage the Festival of Friends’ appeal to a growing tourist market. The sole focus on Canadian musicians was eased and American musical acts were added to the line-up. A beer garden and midway were also added to widen the appeal of the event to families and keep patrons entertained and on-site at Gage Park during festivities.

Over the next decade, music became the main component of Festivals of Friends’ programming with the event attracting headline acts from across the globe. Attendance grew rapidly and is currently estimated at a quarter of a million people (250,000). There is also notable growth from the tourist market which is now estimated by the Festival at 50,000 “tourism destination” travellers from New York State and outside the Greater Hamilton region.

The Festival’s recent growth into a regional event has begun to have an impact on Gage Park and the residential neighbourhood that surrounds it. Recent initiatives to preserve endangered trees in the Park have interfered with the Festival’s footprint. Traffic congestion around Gage Park has led to the implementation of a pilot project to manage parking on local streets in response to resident concerns. Noise complaints have made it increasingly difficult for the Festival to provide the level of service that its audience expects from a festival of its size. As attendance has grown, especially in the evenings, the Hamilton Police Service has expressed concerns about public safety within both the Park and the surrounding neighbourhood.

Analysis:
The long-time relationship between Gage Park and the Festival of Friends holds special significance for many Hamiltonians, especially those Hamiltonians who remember the Festival’s grass roots beginnings. However, the Festival has evolved considerably and is now a large music festival with well-recognized headline acts, increased corporate sponsorship, and a growing regional audience.

As the Festival and its appeal to a wider range of funders has grown, the Festival has become less able to adapt to the limitations of Gage Park. Meetings between Festival organizers and City staff have addressed some of the more straightforward limitations, such as encroachment on tree preservation areas. However, the limitations that arise from the fundamental size, layout and character of Gage Park do not have easy solutions and the planned growth of the Festival is incompatible with the essential residential nature of the Park.

The vision for the recently-approved Gage Park Master Plan is to strengthen the Park as a cultural landscape and to showcase it as a first class jewel for the City. The Master Plan recommends changes to the Park to realize this vision and acknowledges the Park’s important role as a venue for outdoor festivals, but does not fundamentally change the Park’s size, layout, or character. Implementation of the Master Plan’s primary recommendations, currently anticipated in 2013 pending budget approvals, would likely interfere with the execution of the Festival of Friends that year.
Recommended measures to manage compaction of the ground around vulnerable trees would require permanent adjustments to the Festival layout in some areas.

The Board of Directors of the Festival of Friends has determined that, in order to continue to offer a free annual summer music festival in Hamilton that is also a major tourism attraction, the Festival will need to relocate from Gage Park. Their research has led them to the conclusion that the Ancaster Fairgrounds is the best venue option available to them within Hamilton. The Ancaster Fairgrounds is located at the rural edge of Ancaster, just minutes from Highway 403, with over 100 acres of purpose-built grounds that are intended to be easily adaptable to a wide range of outdoor and indoor events. It is a private facility, owned by the Ancaster Agricultural Society.

The Festival Board is asking the City of Hamilton to work with them to facilitate this transition. Although staff recognizes that this transition will be received with mixed opinion by Hamiltonians, staff respects the right of the Board of Directors of the Festival of Friends to choose a venue that best supports its vision and future plans, and is prepared to work with Festival organizers to assist them with the transition.
To Whom It May Concern:

The Festival of Friends has a wonderful thirty-five plus year history that we are very proud of. We are aware of our importance within the scope of National Music Festivals, and that we are among the City’s premiere cultural inventory.

There have been many changes made since 1976, and fundamental changes in the last ten years to our founding formula. We are very pleased to have managed a much lower dependency on municipal funding, however we are thrilled that we have been granted the stability of inclusion in Boards and Agencies.

The Festival of Friends is completely financially stable, and we always pay our bills.

We find ourselves at a new crossroads.

The Festival of Friends has remained stable for attendance during daylight hours for a few years now, and we are delighted by that. The event has been continually gaining momentum in terms of overall attendance during the evenings – getting bigger and better every year. This trend reflects the desired of our Sponsors and funders, and has transformed the Festival of Friends into a major tourism attraction.

As with any endeavour which aspires to attain longevity, we must acknowledge that it is no longer 1976, and we need to adapt with the changing times. Such adaptations are only reached through great deliberations from the Advisory Board and our Stakeholders. Such changes are focussed on maintaining the viability of the event, and as our level of governmental funding is very different that it was some 20 years ago, some of our adaptations have been necessitated by the need for greater corporate sponsorship.

We are by no means complaining about municipal funding levels. We are financially stable, and quite pleased with fact that we are as self-sufficient as can be.

Over the years we have attempted to be as flexible as possible, treating the City of Hamilton as a partner in this endeavour. With the creation of the perennial garden, then the rose garden, and then the protection of particular trees within Gage Park, we have done our very best to re-design the Festival of Friends’ lay-out around the priorities of the City.

The Festival of Friends is not a Canada Day celebration; it is not a multicultural festival. We are proud to be unique among Hamilton’s great many annual summer festivals. We are proud to offer the kind of world-class entertainment that we do. The calibre of entertainment and the level of expenditure therein is unlike any other local festivals. In fact, the Festival of Friends is unlike any other event coast to coast.

The Festival of Friends is the largest Free Annual Summer Music Festival in the Province, and quite possibly in the nation. The event takes place every year on the second weekend of August. We present an exclusively singer/songwriter musical line-up (no cover bands, no tribute acts). The Festival of friends will always be Free to attend.
In the past few years, the Festival of Friends has encountered a few difficulties in logistics, community impact, and the possibility of future growth.

The City of Hamilton’s Master Plan for Gage Park will impact our event in rather profound ways. We are most appreciative of the City granting a few exceptions to us for the benefit of the 2010 event, the City graciously acknowledged the inopportune timing of some physical changes as well as bureaucratic changes that took place at Gage Park this past summer. We understand that such exemptions will not be extended to us in future, and in keeping with the new and future changes planned for Gage Park, the logistics of our installation are simply no longer feasible.

We take great satisfaction in the notion that the Festival of Friends is an integral part of the landscape that is the City of Hamilton. The last thing we want is to be viewed as a negative, as a nuisance to the community we are so happy to be a part of. The residential neighbourhood surrounding Gage Park seems to be beginning to be inconvenienced by the sheer number of people that this event draws every year. With growing residential concerns regarding noise and parking, we do not want to be a source of anything other than pride within our community. As we continue to gain momentum, to grow in popularity as a tourism destination, we feel it will be too taxing on the residential neighbourhoods to remain at Gage Park. The past two years, our Hamilton Regional Police have voiced growing concerns regarding the size of our crowds in the evening, and public safety for exiting the park in a residential neighbourhood. We certainly do not want to put the public in any form of compromised safety. We have a wonderful relationship with the Hamilton Regional Police, and our event – despite its sheer number of attendance, remains a smooth running, issue-free event.

We have been diligently researching our options throughout Greater Hamilton for another possible venue for the Festival of Friends, attempting to address all possible issues we have presently, as well as any we are able to foresee. We believe the Ancaster Fairgrounds to be our best possible solution. Although we will readily voice our agreement that there are challenges presented with this venue, we believe that we are strong enough and resourceful enough to meet these challenges head-on to re-create the Festival of Friends; bigger and better than ever!

We very much want to work with the City of Hamilton to facilitate this transition.

Please feel free to address any questions or concerns with myself, or with Mr. Loren Lieberman at info@creativearts.on.ca, cell: 905-961-7213.

Thank you,

Tara Crugnale

Tara Crugnale  
Festival of Friends Board of Directors  
Cell: 905-541-3986  
t_crugnale@yahoo.ca