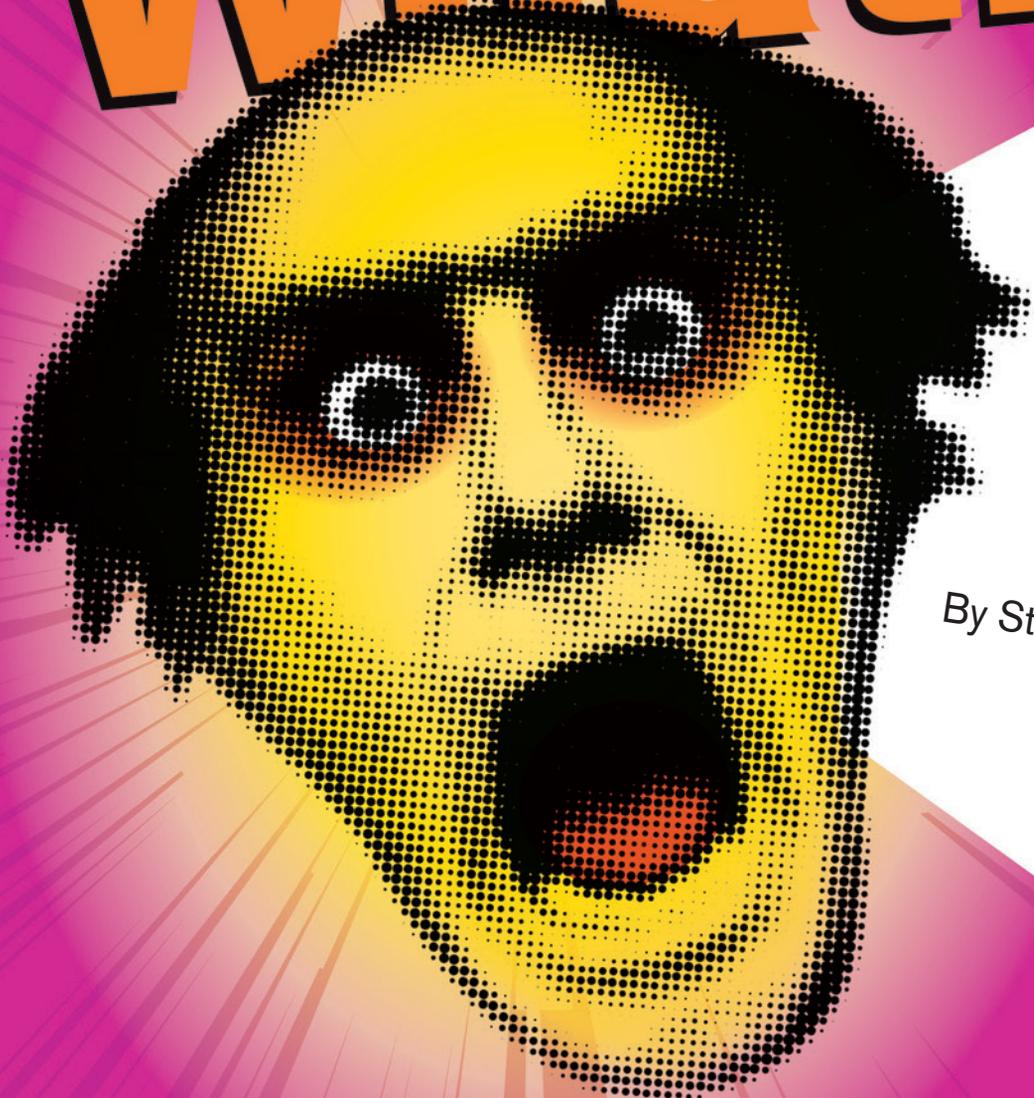


**you
want
to do**
what...?



By Stephen Hollingshead, CFEE

A Tourism and Economic Development perspective on the impact that Festivals or Events have on a community.

"Good Evening Madam Acting Mayor and Council Members. I am here today to ask for permission to shut down the City airport and the air space surrounding it for 4 days. I would like to secure an event for our City that will bring in an estimated \$2 million in economic impact on an annual basis."

"Good Evening Mister Mayor and Council. I am here today, three years in advance, to ask for permission to be the first City of our size to place a bid on a very prestigious World Cup Event. This one time event will last for a total of 10 days and bring an estimated economic impact of \$12 million. So today I'm requesting \$100,000 up front plus the guaranteed usage of all city and privately owned recreational facilities."

"Good Evening Mayor and Council. I am here to ask for permission to bring a new sporting event to our City. In order to accomplish this task, I require your assistance in closing down the main city streets for a total of two days and also allow me to pursue the possibility of a rolling closure on the Trans Canada Highway. The estimated annual economic impact of this event is \$750,000 annually."

For these requests, first came long silence... followed by "YOU WANT TO DO WHAT?"

As festival and event coordinators, this is a common reaction to our sometimes overzealous event concepts and ideas. It's never easy to convince others to see things through our eyes, and it's a much easier task if you've done your homework before going in front of City Council for approval. Yes, citizens and Council members may initially think you're "crazy," so be prepared to bring those impressive economic impact numbers and numerous Tourism-related acronyms to the table.

The three instances listed here were based on actual City Council presentations that subsequently developed into events. I've coordinated all three - which are now successful events - for two different cities. One event in particular is going into its 12th year! That being said, the road to success is never easy. For instance, in one case, when I didn't plan for increment weather, the event was rain delayed for 3 hours; regardless, people brought umbrellas and sat it out. I didn't plan for rain...and learned a very valuable lesson. The moral of the story: "Plan for rain and you will always have sunshine (in one form or another)."

Of course, having the financial support of the Economic Development Corporation (or any private enterprise for that matter) is a definite bonus. However, being able to justify the overall cost in the eyes of the City and Council is another thing. The one great aspect about representing the community from a Tourism perspective is that the taxpayers LOVE to hear about big events coming to town and the projected economic impact numbers. A great majority of the citizens are private sector partners and business owners, be they in the Accommodation, Retail, Restaurant or other sectors.

As a division of the Economic Development Corporation, my Tourism office has identified Festivals and Events as an integral part of our four year Economic Development Strategic Plan. We found that our Festivals and Events were primarily catering to the local and nearby regional markets. Nevertheless, a number of these festivals and events have broader potential to tap into the Tourism marketplace. One means of achieving this was to offer suitable packages that will include accommodations, attractions and other features.

Increasing Tourism revenue through Meetings, Conventions, Special Events and Sports Tourism Initiatives was also clearly identified as a key objective and

achievable goal. Being a US/Canada border community certainly has its challenges and concerns, however there is a great potential to secure business from these sectors as well. Recognizing our excellent sports and meeting facilities and our immediate proximity to interesting attractions has helped us to attract numerous associations and international organizations that are looking for host locations. Proactively working with local, regional, National and International event coordinators and encouraging them to stage events here has forced us to create and update both print and electronic promotional materials. Creating new Bid Packages has allowed us to create an overall brand that our community is a viable destination in the eyes of event rights holders and a positive future location to host an event. The anticipated economic impact numbers of each individual event creates a benchmark for which I can attempt to secure funding from Corporate Sponsors, City Administration, Economic Development Corporation and numerous Government Funding agencies.

As an Economic Development and Tourism professional, I'm used to being put under the microscope. We approach an event idea or concept as "This is a great idea, let's figure a way to make this work, as our hotels, retail establishments and restaurants will love this." Looking through the eyes of City Council, I understand that they're not in the business of putting on events and/or providing financial support for what may be deemed as "risky behavior." Most often an event will be local in its attempt to satisfy or justify the needs of the community at large. The responsibility of Council is to justify costs in the eyes of the taxpayer and the community as a whole.

Regardless of the response, I've always followed the advice of a fellow Festival and Event professional: "If your advisers keep giving 'NO' for an answer, it's time to look for new advisers". I look at festivals and events from the perspective of sustainability and community long term benefit. This usually involves bringing in teams or groups for long term stays: whether it's for a conference, special event or sporting event. Most often, Sporting Events are "events within events" requiring a multitude of services such as catering, decoration, entertainment, audio/visual, transportation, site visits, etc. The goal is that once the group has had the time to experience the community, follow up contact will assist us in securing future visitations through their networks.

The role of an Economic Development Corporation becomes more complex and challenging with each passing year. Budgets keep getting tighter, Tourism

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industry needs continually change and global economic, social and environment factors bring new levels of complexity to the job. We must be entrepreneurial and innovative in our attempts to understand and address the challenges that lie ahead. Though we must deliver results and be held accountable, more often than not we simply need the freedom to be creative in order to deliver results at a higher level.

In many cases, the biggest challenge is to find ways to decrease the reliance on public sector funding and to diversify the funding stream by searching for non-traditional sources. When you're a community that has only so much big business, the smaller guy is often overwhelmed by the relentless requests for Sponsorship support. Helping organizations to complete government funding applications for their event is a painful process, but the final result can be very beneficial. Instructing event planners on how to increase revenue through "Non Sponsorship Programs" is a process that always involves "brain storming" and can produce amazing results and financial gains as well.

In the case of "Sports Tourism," often these participants can be identified as Tourists as well. The following are two Examples to demonstrate the differences:

Examples #1: 2,500 International participants for 10 days = 25,000 Visitor Days.

Examples #2: 18 National participants for three days = 54 visitor days.

For both cases, the economic impact can be easily measured by adding an economic multiplier, basically called Visitor Day Economic Impact, but there is one fundamental difference. In Examples #1 the participants were also the Tourists as they arrived from across the globe and required fixed roof accommodations in addition to playing the sport. In Examples #2 the participants were the players and the large audience who came from across the Province to watch this well known sport where the majority of the Tourists. Both events had a significant economic impact on the City, but for the purpose of measuring the impact,

Examples #1 was a much easier process; we knew the demographic profile of each participant. This can be a crucial element for post event reporting and it really demonstrates the value of hosting this particular type of sporting event.

Regardless of whose perception is accurate, one thing that stands true in all events is that attention to detail is of the utmost importance. Asking for, and initially securing, support from the Mayors Office and City Council will be paramount to the success of the event. Finding a local champion, engaging the community, securing funding, inventing and then reinventing the event will help to sustain it as it grows. The final economic impact of the event can not be fully realized until after it has come and gone. When a post-event evaluation has been completed, the real value of the event should shine through. It's never easy to take a loss, but with the support of City Council on your side, there is a better chance it won't happen.

Successful event planning for the betterment of Tourism has forced me to focus more on topics like finance, law, marketing, promotions and event management. It all boils down to who and what is actually required to successfully execute an event. Hosting an event is not possible without a location, usually a City-owned piece of property, or a particular facility. Mayor receptions and special requests usually go through City Council, so keeping them informed at all levels is also very important. Local businesses (taxpayers) are who you will eventually approach for sponsorship, whether in-kind or cash. Hotels, retail outlets and restaurants will all benefit greatly from having the event in your community, and they may also want to become more involved.

It would not be possible to host an event and showcase a City and its amenities without multitude of experts; from cheerleaders to lawyers, from athletes to artists. We all know the feelings associated with seeing your favourite band or entertainer and the joy it brings to the general public. Each event

will have a unique theme or purpose, be it a winter carnival or a benefit concert for a worthy cause. All this takes planning, people and patience, and if executed properly the outcome is overwhelming.

I believe that my strong background in the theory and practices associated with tourism and event planning has made our City more attractive to National and International associations. Completing the prerequisites for being a Certified Festivals and Event Executive has allowed me to better share my broad business knowledge and hone the specific skills I've acquired through this process that are unique to this industry.

I will never forget my first Post Event Report to City Council. The Mayor was known as a "bull dog" and I feared her more than even the idea of approaching the podium. I knew that not only my Economic Development career was at stake, but all the sponsors, vendors and the general public who attended the event would be watching. I rambled on and on about the positive economic impact numbers, participant demographics, sizable charitable donation, attendance numbers and gate receipts. I was then asked by the Mayor if I actually saw her at the event. In all honesty I had to tell her that I did not as I was too busy making sure that everyone was enjoying the event and that nothing went wrong.

Her reply was to the point...and to this day a simple quote that I hold very near and dear to my event-filled heart. She said "I sat on the VIP stage for the entire event, up front and centre. In all my years on Council I have never seen anything like it; I had to pinch myself to realize I was actually in our City. Congratulations on a job well done.... that was Economic Development from within this community!"

Go figure...substantial Economic Development (heads in beds), a happy community and a proud Mayor and Council; all this from hosting a single event.

I have the best job and I'm still employed doing what I love to do!

Stephen Hollingshead, CFE is the Coordinator of Special Projects and Sports Tourism at Tourism Sault Ste. Marie (a division of the Sault Ste. Marie Economic Development Corporation) in Ontario, Canada. He has enjoyed a prosperous career in the Entertainment, Hospitality, Sales and Tourism industry for over 30 years. He resides in Ontario, Canada with his wife and two adult children and family.