

# Tom Lee Park renovations will likely force Memphis in May to shrink. Can the festival survive?

[Ted Evanoff](#), Memphis Commercial Appeal Published 6:00 a.m. CT Aug. 5, 2019

**Over 50,000 people once thronged Memphis in May. Festival head James Holt figures the festival can shrink in Tom Lee Park and still thrive as long as there is room for 30,000 music fans.**

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Memphis in May, the big festival that fills Downtown every spring, will probably get smaller.

Over 50,000 music fans once packed Tom Lee Park for the city's premier festival.

James Holt figures a smaller festival selling as few as 30,000 tickets to music fans can thrive. But it can't get smaller than that without suffering.

He's the chief executive of Memphis in May International, the 14-employee nonprofit that stages the eight-day music and barbecue bash every year, bringing 100,000 visitors Downtown.

Shrinking seems better than the alternative — leaving Tom Lee Park. Moving away from Tom Lee and the riverfront risks putting the festival into decline.

“We’re hopeful we’ll be returning to Tom Lee Park,” Holt said.

## Figuring what we can live without

As lots of people in town know, Memphis River Parks Partnership would recast Tom Lee Park into a \$60 million urban gem. Recently, Carol Coletta, the Parks Partnership chief executive, [spoke in this column of the need to re-imagine the worn and hard-to-reach Mud Island River Park](#). She said Tom Lee Park could become the destination park. She thinks the festival could thrive in a redone Tom Lee.

Then we spoke to Holt, who was hired in 1988 as the festival's executive director. Memphis in May has run like a machine over the years and was seldom challenged to explain why it mattered — until the parks group aimed to renovate Tom Lee Park. Holt feared a renovated park would starve the big festival for room. He warned Memphis in May might have to leave Downtown.

**MEMPHIS IN MAY HISTORY:** [In 1977, the board of Memphis in May revived a downtown that had died along with MLK Jr.](#)

Last month, [Mayor Jim Strickland again emphasized the festival would remain in Tom Lee Park](#). The mayor said a great festival and a great park are both doable. He earlier appointed a retired judge, [Janice Holder, to mediate between the parks and festival groups](#).

Now both sides are trying to figure out what they can live without. Holt figures Memphis in May can live without the space it once had. He's confident the festival can succeed.

“We’ve been working hard to resolve the matter,” Holt said. “We hope to return to Tom Lee Park for another 43 years.”

## **Tom Lee is 'cornerstone of our success'**

With the 43rd annual festival over, I asked Holt what he tells people already planning for No. 44.

When cooking teams, booking agents for musical artists, vendors and festival volunteers ask where Memphis in May will locate next year, and the years after that, Holt can now repeat Strickland's point — the festival will return in 2020 to Tom Lee, leave temporarily in 2021 while the park is reconstructed, then come back.

“I think everyone wants to see improvements made in Tom Lee Park,” Holt said. “I think we all want to see the riverfront improved. I feel Mud Island should be improved. We also want to make sure Memphis in May remains financially viable.”

That’s the key.

Memphis in May has been a tradition so long that it sounds odd that Holt would have to speak up for financial viability, especially now.

This spring, [Facebook flew in pop star Miley Cyrus to perform on a Memphis in May stage](#) for its own national ad.

Miley Cyrus performs a live surprise set to celebrate the launch of Facebook's new campaign, More Together, alongside Marc Cohn at the Beale Street Music Festival, Saturday, May 4, 2019 in Memphis. Provided by Facebook, Memphis Commercial Appeal

Tapping the city’s music vibe for a social media giant’s house ad is the kind of attention a festival gets if it’s getting everything right. Revenue for this spring’s festival topped the prior year’s \$11 million record. Visitors filled restaurants, bars, hotels and museums. Holt estimates local sales tax revenue reached \$3.5 million as a result of all of Memphis in May activities.

That number might sound meager, though it’s like having a new business help shoulder the tax load. [Remember Indigo Ag?](#) Memphis officials recruiting the seed developer’s new operations center figure local taxes paid by the company and its 875 employees will average about \$3 million per year. Memphis in May generates the same tax amount each year.

"We feel Tom Lee Park is the cornerstone of our success," Holt said. "It has a fabulous view of the river, and it's close to the Beale Street Historic District and is in close proximity to the Downtown hotels."

## **55,000 fans once packed Tom Lee**

It takes money to make money, as that old saying goes. For Memphis in May, making money depends in large part on the musicians. Stars attract crowds.

Twenty years ago, the festival paid all the musicians who came to play \$650,000 in total. Back then bands relied on sales of recorded music. Musicians rely now on live events. Performance fees have soared. [Including pop star Cardi B](#) and the roster of other musicians, Holt said musical acts pocketed more than \$3.5 million playing this spring's Memphis in May.

Merchandise and food sales, festival sponsors and barbecue team fees brought in money along with admission to the Beale Street Music Festival. About 35,000 tickets were sold this year. The least expensive day ticket cost about \$55.

That's a lot of tickets, but trails the peak. Almost two decades ago, Tom Lee packed in 55,000 music fans. Then, the park shrank. The north tip was given over by the old riverfront parks agency to the new Beale Street Landing, a \$43 million terminal for river cruise ships. Riverside Drive next to the park was remade into four lanes divided by a landscaped median. Widening the road, installing the median and adding the terminal eliminated room for 15,000 to 20,000 people.

Current plans would reshape Tom Lee Park. The 30-acre flat expanse would contain three broad open areas amid trees, plantings, swales, fountains, a bird habitat tower and a shaded basketball court. The open areas would accommodate music fans. Holt said Memphis in May could remain financially viable with 30,000 music fans and 200 [barbecue teams \(compared to about 250 teams this year\)](#). Falling below those numbers would cut into its financial viability.

Memphis in May could raise ticket prices and fees to make up for the loss, although park supporters say the festival could also explore new money-making methods in a renovated Tom Lee. Park backers say the festival could put a plush bar inside the bird habitat selling premium drinks, or rent out the basketball court at a high corporate rate as a lounge for guests.

Great festival or great park? This is ultimately Strickland's call.

He's said both can be had. Holt sounds confident. The parks group is looking hard at this too.

"We're hopeful mediation will be resolved in the not too distant future," Holt said.