

Forecast for Summer Festivals is Still Muddy

Written by Jeff Ignatius
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The unruly and inconsiderate Mississippi River finally freed LeClaire Park from its muddy grip this week, but events scheduled for the venue for the rest of the summer still might need to look for new locations.

The city has not yet determined when or whether LeClaire Park will be ready for concerts, festivals, and other events scheduled for this summer. But it's almost certain that no event scheduled for June in the park will be able to use it.

That time frame is especially bad for the Mississippi Valley Blues Society's 2001 Bluesfest. It's scheduled for July 6 to 8, and even the optimistic four-week forecast for LeClaire Park could make it difficult to hold the festival there.

Already, the Sturgis on the River motorcycle event June 15 and 16 was shifted to Second Street, and a June concert series was cancelled.

Other events scheduled for LeClaire Park this summer include the Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Jazz Festival, the River Rockin' Ribfest, and the Quad City Symphony Orchestra's Riverfront Pops concert.

Had the flooding left the LeClaire Park lawn in good condition, the venue might have been ready in the next couple weeks. Cleaning and disinfecting the bandshell and seats is "the easy part," said Jef Farland, the city's director of leisure facilities and services.

But the Mississippi left the park covered in silt, and a new lawn appears to be the only choice.

"It's a real mess," Farland said. City officials visited LeClaire Park on Tuesday to assess damage to the lawn and irrigation system.

"All indications are the grass is in pretty rough shape," he said before the visit. The city might seed the lawn or sod it, and that decision will determine whether LeClaire Park can be used for the rest of the summer. The less-expensive alternative, seeding, would keep events out of the park for the rest of the summer, while sodding would make the site off-limits for at least four weeks but is more expensive.

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Farland said he'd prefer to sod the lawn so LeClaire Park can host some of its events, but "that's going to be a financial decision." If Federal Emergency Management Agency money is not available – and Farland said he didn't think it would be for this project – the approach would depend on what cost the city council is willing to incur. Farland said the city is currently trying to figure out the costs associated with each alternative.

The flood has already taken a toll on riverfront events beyond baseball games.

DavenportOne cancelled its lunchtime summer concert series for June, originally slated for LeClaire Park. The organization had secured an alternative location – on the lawn of the Ground Transportation building on Second Street – but flooding still caused problems. "We had changed locations, and we were still running into roadblocks," said Kristy Adams, director of downtown events and promotions for DavenportOne.

The organization still has the River Rockin' Ribfest scheduled for August 24 to 26 in LeClaire Park. Adams said DavenportOne will use Second Street for the event if LeClaire Park is not available, but that presents logistical challenges. Because the Ribfest is a paid-admission event, downtown streets would need to be fenced in, she said. And she's not certain whether all the vendors will fit in the space.

"We're all holding our breath," Adams said.

Organizers of events in August and later can afford to wait until the city makes a decision on its course of action with the park, but they're still playing it safe.

The Quad City Symphony Orchestra's Riverfront Pops concert is scheduled for September 8 in LeClaire Park, but the organization is still scouting alternative sites. "We're still waiting to hear from the City of Davenport," said Erin Lounsberry, spokesperson for the symphony. "We are investigating our options."

The concert was held at The Mark during the flood of 1993, and attendance suffered, she said. As a result, "our preference would be outdoors" if LeClaire Park is unavailable. Summer pops concerts are *meant* to be outdoor events, and putting them indoors robs them of some of their charm.

The Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Jazz Festival is also looking at other venues, including John O'Donnell Stadium, the RiverCenter, and the Mississippi Valley Fairgrounds. The event re-located during the 1993 flood to Museum Hill, but festival manager Ray Voss said it wasn't very successful. Voss said that if LeClaire Park is unavailable, he'd like to have some of the festival's shows at John O'Donnell, where people in the audience still have a river view.

The jazz bash faces some obstacles that other events don't encounter, though. With the Wells Fargo Street Fest and the Bix 7 also happening the weekend of July 19 to 22, the jazz event cannot take over streets if it's shut out of LeClaire Park.

Perhaps the festival most in the lurch, though, is the Mississippi Valley Blues Society's

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Bluesfest on the weekend following the Independence Day holiday. With a lineup including Buddy Guy, Koko Taylor, Anthony Gomes, and Billy Branch, the popular festival should draw plenty of fans from all over the region. Unlike other events late in the summer, though, the Blues Society needs to get its marketing materials out soon, even though it cannot say for sure where it will be held.

Joe Griffen, the blues society's treasurer, said his group would prefer to have the festival downtown if it can't be held at LeClaire Park, but no decision on an alternative site has been made.