Decision to relocate Nightly Indian Dances causes friction

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
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Nightly Native dances have been a part of Gallup's summer tradition for years, but like many longstanding events returning from a pandemic hiatus, changes are in the works.

As part of the Gallup Cultural Center's city-sponsored refresh, the formerly Nightly Indian Dances will return for three nights a week at a new arena under construction there.

That's not good news for restaurant owner James Rich, who's unhappy that the dances will leave Courthouse Plaza. For years he's kept Camille's Sidewalk Café open in the evenings to serve patrons who come to the plaza to watch the dances.

It's not just that the dances are moving, he said, but that business owners around the plaza were not consulted before the change was announced to the City Council April 12.

"The lack of inclusion has led us to feel a little disappointed with the decisions that are being made with the nightly dance program," he said. "Without the opportunity to be in that conversation to relocate it, just unilaterally make a decision to relocate it, we learned that tonight. It was a huge mistake."

He found sympathetic ears in Gallup City Councilors Fran Palochak and Linda Garcia.

“I was very sad to see the dances were moving from courthouse plaza because it’s such a beautiful venue. It’s round and has seating,” Palochak said. “The plaza was built for this purpose… I just don’t want to see that side die to promote another side of town. The goal and focus is to make downtown vibrant. If there’s too much separation that’s not going to happen.”

Garcia agreed.

“I was also sad [...] to hear we’re not using courthouse square for dances,” she said. “It always drew the people. It was crowded and the tourists just loved it.”

The plaza will still have entertainment.

City Marketing Director Jennifer Lazarz said there will be a 10-concert Levitt Amp music series there and, after Rich’s complaint, the City Council has asked her to look into adding Native dances at the plaza a couple of nights a week.

Lazarz’ office is also looking at a proposal to have “Family Fun Nights,” possibly featuring attractions like a bounce house, climbing wall and obstacle course at the plaza, and maybe country dance nights.

That entertainment would come out of about $50,000 she learned of the morning of the meeting, she said.

“There was money squirreled away somewhere that it didn’t need to be squirreled,” Lazarz said.

But until those plans go before the Council May 10, plaza business owners are in limbo.

“We’re already doing summer staffing. We’ve already begun hiring,” Rich said. “It creates a lot of heartache and a lot of pain for investors and business owners that prepare, staffing for the summer program.”

Lazarz took responsibility for the oversight, explaining that the contract with the Cultural Center, which provided $60,000 of Lodgers Tax funding for renovations, program development and marketing, was signed last September. That gobbled up much of the budget that was previously devoted to nightly dances, which cost $65,000 in 2019. She also said attendance at the dances had been declining for years.

“The program running for as long as it had been, seven nights a week for 100 days of summer, it was shrinking. Our audiences were shrinking. Our artist vendors were shrinking,” she said. “It was hard to get artists to commit to come in that many nights of the week. We started to run into dance groups having other obligations.

“There is a lot of competition for this kind of thing now,” she added.

In addition to concerns about their own business operations, Rich noted that the dances moved to the plaza partly out of concerns over safety and disruptive train noise at the Cultural Center, which is in the renovated Santa Fe Depot. The arena under construction now may not even be suitable for dances, he told the City Council.

“It’s on concrete. It’s supposed to be on dirt. Some of the dancers may object to that,” he said. “There is no keyhole to enter that dance arena. Some of the ladies with the long dresses will have a challenge stepping over that wall.”

Leaving him and other plaza businesses out of the conversation is a slight to the investments they have made, Rich explained.

“I don’t see it as a homecoming. I see it as a step back and away from a huge investment,” he

said. “We’ve invested millions in that [plaza] facility, coming up on 15 years this summer.“

The move is part of a larger refresh at the Cultural Center, and Lazarz sees it as a way to ensure that all of downtown is bustling all summer long.

“I look forward to healing that relationship and doing what I can to make sure we have the best programming across downtown and not just in one place,” she said.

Watch for a preview of the Cultural Center renovation in next week’s Gallup Sun.

By Holly J. Wagner
Sun Correspondent