Letter Regarding the Location of the Rain Day Festival

The Rain Day Festival has been an important part of the Waynesburg community for generations. It is an event that celebrates our community, brings visitors into town, supports local businesses, provides activities for families, and continues a tradition that has helped give Waynesburg its unique identity.

As discussions continue regarding the location of Rain Day and whether the festival should be held on High Street or within the parks, it is important that the decision be based on the complete picture. The location of the festival is not simply a matter of tradition or preference. It involves significant considerations regarding **public safety, emergency response, accessibility, traffic, law enforcement, infrastructure, vendors, businesses, and the overall experience for festival attendees.**

The following information is being provided to explain why the parks have become the preferred location for the festival and why moving Rain Day back onto High Street would create significant challenges.

Public Safety Must Remain the First Priority

First and foremost, the safety of festival participants, residents, visitors, law enforcement personnel, emergency responders, vendors, volunteers, and employees must be considered. Holding Rain Day within the parks eliminates or greatly reduces the possibility of a vehicle being driven directly through the middle of a large festival crowd. This has become an increasingly important concern for communities across the country as law-enforcement agencies and municipalities have had to examine the security of large public gatherings.

Rain Day itself has experienced an incident in which a DUI driver drove through the festival at the conclusion of the event. While no community wants to see an incident like this happen again, it demonstrates the potential danger associated with placing a large crowd directly on a major roadway.

If Rain Day were held on High Street, there would be approximately 10 points of controlled access required to effectively shut down the roadway. By comparison, the parks allow the festival to operate with fewer control points, and those points are not located on major traffic routes. This difference is significant from a law-enforcement and emergency-management perspective.

High Street is a state road and a major corridor through Waynesburg. When the festival is placed directly on the roadway, the crowd essentially becomes a long, linear gathering surrounded by buildings. This creates what can be described as a "canyon" effect, with limited opportunities for emergency vehicles and people to move through or around the crowd.

The parks provide a much more open environment. Emergency vehicles can have access around the perimeter of the festival. Police and emergency personnel can be centrally located within or near the festival area. An ambulance and firetruck can be positioned within the festival grounds, allowing emergency responders to reach someone who needs assistance without having to navigate through a densely packed street crowd. This can shorten emergency response times and provide responders with more options in the event of a medical emergency, fire, evacuation, or other unforeseen situation.

The parks also provide additional opportunities for crowd dispersal and evacuation if an emergency should occur. Instead of having a crowd confined between buildings and along a roadway, attendees have access to open grassy areas where they can move away from an emergency situation.

Traffic and Emergency Response

Traffic is another major concern when Rain Day is held on High Street. High Street is not simply a local residential street. It is part of an important transportation corridor through Waynesburg. Closing High Street for the festival requires traffic to be redirected through surrounding streets that were not designed to accommodate the volume of traffic that normally travels through the area. This includes commercial vehicles. This creates additional congestion and increases the potential for traffic conflicts, property damage, and accidents. The diversion also affects state routes, including Routes 21, 18, 19, and 218, for the duration of the event. Redirecting that traffic can create backups and, in some circumstances, can result in the detour route becoming difficult to navigate. These traffic concerns also affect emergency response.

Heat and Medical Safety

Heat is another important consideration. This is particularly important for children, senior citizens, individuals with disabilities, and anyone who may be more vulnerable to extreme heat. When Rain Day is held on High Street, attendees are surrounded by buildings, concrete, pavement, and asphalt. The combination of direct sunlight, hot pavement, buildings, and body heat from a large crowd can significantly increase the temperature experienced by those attending the festival. In recent years, heat-related illnesses have become an increasingly important concern at outdoor events.

The parks provide a much more open environment with grass, shade, airflow, and additional room between attendees. Families can bring lawn chairs and blankets and spread out rather than being confined to a crowded roadway. The availability of open grass also provides attendees with opportunities to sit down, rest, and cool off.

Accessibility and Accommodations

Accessibility is another major consideration when comparing High Street with the parks. The Rain Day Committee has worked to accommodate individuals with disabilities by providing handicap parking spaces in and around the festival area, including designated spaces on Morris Street, and a entire parking lot designated for handicap parking. Shuttle transportation has also been provided, including ADA-accessible shuttle service. Handicap-accessible portable restrooms and handwashing stations are provided, and efforts are made to avoid placing vendors in areas with significant slopes or difficult terrain. It is important to recognize that the festival did not create the existing terrain or sidewalk conditions in Waynesburg. Just as there are accessibility challenges in other areas of town, there are areas within the community where grades and sidewalks do not meet modern ADA accessibility expectations. The festival committee makes every effort to work around those existing conditions and provide accommodations wherever possible.

Fountain Park provides a relatively flat grassy area for children's activities and family participation. Attendees have access to both upper and lower portions of the park, providing additional options for individuals to find an appropriate place to sit and enjoy the festival.

By contrast, holding the festival on High Street presents several challenges, such as; there may be limited nearby parking, and individuals who cannot find parking close to the event may still be required to navigate steep grades to reach the festival area. The courthouse lawn also presents accessibility challenges because access to portions of the area requires navigating steps.

The Parks Allow for Better Festival Operations

The parks also provide advantages from an operational standpoint.

Beginning in 2021, Rain Day was held in the parks for the first time. This was necessary in part because of COVID-19 restrictions and the inability to return to the traditional High Street format at that time. The Waynesburg Borough Council approved the use of the parks. Following the 2021 festival, surveys and feedback through social media indicated that the community response to the parks location was positive, with positive feedback outweighing negative feedback.

It is also important to clarify that the Rain Day Festival did not simply decide to move the event away from High Street without consideration of the community or operational requirements. PennDOT was not issuing road-closure permits at the time. Permitting did not begin until closer to June, which was too late in the festival planning process to make a change back to High Street.

The parks therefore became the practical location for the festival, and the experience demonstrated that the parks could successfully accommodate the event. Since that time, the festival has continued to improve its layout and accommodations.

From 2021 through 2022, shuttle bus service was provided. Individuals with disabilities were also permitted to park within the festival area and on Morris Street. Beginning in 2023, maps have been provided identifying handicap parking areas within the festival area and along Morris Street going out of town.

These changes were made to make the festival easier and more accessible for everyone.

The Parks Provide More Space and Better Crowd Distribution

Another major advantage of the parks is the amount of usable space available. On High Street, crowds can become shoulder-to-shoulder along a relatively narrow corridor. This creates congestion for attendees, vendors, emergency personnel, strollers, wheelchairs, and families. The parks allow attendees to spread out. There is more space between vendors, more space between attendees, and more room for families to sit and enjoy the festival. Children have access to larger open areas where they can participate in activities and move around more safely, such as in Fountain Park. Monument Park allows vendors to be positioned along the sidewalks without filling the entire park with activities. The two parks together create a more open festival environment while still keeping the event concentrated in the center of town.

The Festival Has Expanded Beyond a Traditional Street Fair

It is also important to understand the evolution of Rain Day. Rain Day has a long history in Waynesburg, but the modern festival has grown considerably. The community has been tracking rain for more than 150 years. That history should not be confused with the modern festival itself. The street fair began in 1979, and over time the event grew into the Rain Day Festival that the community knows today. The size of the festival has also grown substantially compared with many other events held in town. Rain Day is significantly larger than events such as the 1950s Festival and Car Show, Christmas on High Street, and other parades and community events. Even the Farmers Market has moved from High Street to a parking-lot setting because of security and operational considerations.

As the size of an event increases, the infrastructure required to safely accommodate it also changes. What may have worked for a smaller event in the past may not be the safest or most practical option for a significantly larger modern festival.

Advantages of Holding Rain Day in the Parks

The parks provide numerous advantages that directly address many of the concerns associated with holding the festival on High Street.

Among those advantages are:

- More grassy areas for sitting and relaxing/ larger areas where children can play & participate in activities/ More room for attendees to move through the festival
- More shade and opportunities to escape the heat.
- Handicap shuttle service operating throughout the day/ Handicap parking within the festival area and on Morris Street.
- Improved access for individuals with disabilities.
- Ambulance and firetruck access within the festival area/ Easier access for emergency responders.
- Fewer traffic detours/ Less disruption to major transportation routes.
- Fewer Security Control points/ More effective crowd dispersal if an evacuation is necessary.
- No cables or wires running across streets or sidewalks.
- Greater spacing between vendors/ additional vendor opportunities
- Fewer security concerns involving the courthouse and local businesses.
- Food vendors can be located within the festival footprint/ two stages can be utilized
- Additional seating for individuals to sit and eat at, picnic tables provided.

Commercial and Craft Vendors

The parks also allow commercial and craft vendors to be arranged in a manner that makes it easier for attendees to walk and shop. Vendors can be positioned along sidewalks so that people can move through the vendor areas without creating the same level of crowding found on a narrow street. While no layout can eliminate every challenge, the parks give the festival committee considerably more flexibility when determining where vendors are located.

Impact on Local Businesses and Government Infrastructure

Holding Rain Day on High Street also creates significant infrastructure and security challenges for surrounding government offices and businesses. The festival does not occur on a weekend every year, and its weekday timing can create additional operational concerns.

When large numbers of visitors are concentrated directly around the courthouse, District Court 13-3-01, Greene County Court of Common Pleas, and county offices, the influx of people can exceed the ability of the Greene County Sheriff's Department and Waynesburg Borough Police Department to effectively secure all of those locations while simultaneously managing the festival.

Moving the festival into the parks reduces the amount of government infrastructure that becomes directly surrounded by the event. It also creates a more defined festival perimeter. This is important not only for festival security but also for the normal operation of government offices and businesses.

Addressing Statements and Misunderstandings

Borough tax dollars are not being used to fund this event. All monies come from sponsors.

Rain Day's Future

The Rain Day Festival has survived because it has adapted, the festival has changed as Waynesburg has changed, and the size of the event has grown. Safety expectations have changed. The festival has changed in response to circumstances such as COVID-19, permitting requirements, traffic considerations, and the needs of the community.

The move to the parks was initially influenced by circumstances beyond the festival committee's control. However, the experience demonstrated that the parks provide many benefits that are difficult to achieve on High Street.

The goal should not be to change Rain Day simply for the sake of change. The goal should be to ensure that Rain Day remains a successful community event while protecting the people who attend, work at, volunteer for, and provide emergency services during the festival.

A Request to Consider the Complete Picture

When considering the future location of Rain Day, we respectfully ask that the entire picture be considered rather than focusing solely on the tradition of holding the event on High Street. Tradition is an important part of Rain Day. However, tradition should exist alongside modern considerations for safety, accessibility, emergency response, traffic management, and the needs of today's community. Rain Day has demonstrated that it can continue to be successful in the parks. No festival can eliminate every possible risk, no location can accommodate every person in exactly the same way. Rain Day is not simply a street closure. It is a large community festival that requires coordination among volunteers, vendors, businesses, police, fire, EMS, municipal officials, PennDOT, residents, and visitors. The location of the event affects every one of those groups. The parks allow the festival to remain in the heart of Waynesburg while providing the open space necessary for a modern festival of this size.

We believe the conversation about Rain Day should therefore focus on what allows the festival to remain safe, accessible, sustainable, and enjoyable for the entire community.

Its success is the result of generations of residents, volunteers, businesses, community organizations, municipal officials, emergency responders, and visitors who have supported it. The Rain Day Festival Committee remains committed to working with these individuals and the community, to continue improving the festival and addressing legitimate concerns.

As we look toward the future, our responsibility is to preserve that tradition while making thoughtful decisions that reflect the realities of today's community. We appreciate everyone who has contributed to Rain Day over the years and everyone who continues to work to ensure that this long-standing Waynesburg tradition continues for generations to come.

Respectfully,

Rain Day Festival Committee