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Norfolk State says it won't be venue for Afr'Am Fest

Afr'Am Fest is searching for a new venue after Norfolk State University killed plans to hold the popular Memorial Day music festival on its campus.

The final decision comes days after opposition from residents living near the school caused university President Carolyn Meyers to balk at the plan.

The university announced late Friday that it terminated its agreement with the Southeastern Virginia Arts Association, known as SEVAA, because the school was not given a detailed proposal that would address several outstanding issues, including security, parking and noise.

"It is with great regret the university had to come to this decision," Meyers said in a press release. "After reviewing recent feedback from our neighbors and the city, it is apparent that the NSU campus venue is not the right fit for this major event."

Festival director Mark Madison acknowledged Saturday that the group could not alleviate many of the concerns but said the group will push forward with plans to sponsor the African American cultural festival this year.

Madison said other locations were being discussed, but he did not elaborate.

"Residents have valid concerns," Madison said. "It is not the festival they don't support - it is the logistical nightmare. We could not ensure it would be anything other than what typically goes on for football games."

University officials had been studying since September the feasibility of holding the festival on the campus of the historically black university, later convening a committee to gauge the concerns, said Sharon Hoggard, an NSU spokeswoman.



Afr'Am officials approached the school after they learned that Town Point Park would not be available. The park is undergoing an \$11.5 million renovation and won't reopen until early July.

While residents complained that swells of as many as 300,000 festival attendees would have a significant impact on the adjacent communities, Meyers stressed that a lack of support from the university's neighbors could derail the effort.

"We tried everything we could," Hoggard said Saturday. "Our neighbors were our first consideration. They just don't want us to do it, and they don't think it can be done in a way to keep them safe and secure. We deeply regret the decision, but we did not have a choice."

Hoggard said NSU hand-delivered a letter to residents, alerting them of the move and plans to hold a community meeting at 7 p.m. Feb. 16 to foster a better relationship.

"I wanted to scream," said Middle Towne Arch resident Jamie Edmonds, who opposed the plan. "This is a huge victory for us. We knew Norfolk State has the right to hold it there, but just because you have the right to do something does not mean it was the right thing to do."

Norfolk Councilman Paul R. Riddick, whose ward encompasses the area, said that while he was critical of the plan, city administrators were working feverishly to find an appropriate location for the event.

"We are going to do our very best to accommodate SEVAA and make Afr'Am as close to what it is accustomed to being," Riddick said. "It is going to happen this year."

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