

BRIDGEPORT NEWS

City readies for Vibes; Music festival opens Friday at Seaside Park

Written by Brad Durrell

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City officials said they are ready for the many thousands of music fans expected to assemble this weekend at Seaside Park for the three-day Gathering of the Vibes music festival.

"We think we are prepared for the mass of people who will gather at Seaside Park," newly appointed city Public Facilities Director Charles Carroll said earlier this week.

From 20,000 to 25,000 spectators daily could attend the Vibes festival, which attracts such well-known musicians as the Black Crowes, Neville Brothers, Phil Lesh and Friends, Taj Mahal Trio and Dweezil Zappa. The festival goes from Friday, Aug. 1, to Sunday, Aug. 3.

Carroll, previously city parks director, said many municipal departments have worked closely with Vibes organizers to assure the event goes smoothly. "It's been well-planned by the concert promoters," he said.

Carroll said city officials are experienced at what needs to be done because Bridgeport hosted the music festival in 1999, 2000 and 2007. Vibes promoters and city officials recently signed a contract to have the event take place in Bridgeport for the next five years.

Police Chief Bryan Norwood said up to 25 police officers per shift will be assigned to the festival, with some using the department's six new all-terrain vehicles to patrol the waterfront park.

The officers will be supplemented by a Vibes security staff of about 100, Norwood said. Carroll expects to be at Seaside Park every day to check on crowd control, how the grounds are being treated, parking issues and the impact on the nearby South End neighborhood. "We'll be monitoring what goes on," he said, noting the five-year contract has language that would allow the city to back out if problems arise. In addition, Carroll said officials will make sure the public has access to the far western part of Seaside Park.

Some sections of Seaside Park will be closed to the public and open only to festival-goers. A part of the gated festival grounds will be open only to overnight campers, who must purchase special tickets. Campers can arrive as early as Thursday.

Tickets sales are strong

Ken Hays, festival co-founder, said the crowd is expected to be as big as last year. "Ticket sales are pretty consistent with what we had last year," Hays, a Greenwich resident, said Monday night.

Hays said the expected turnout is particularly impressive with this year's economic downturn and much higher gasoline prices.

More people, he said, do seem to be purchasing one-day tickets rather than three-day passes. "That's a trend," Hays said. He's also hopeful about the weather — a big factor, no doubt, in same-day ticket sales — but noted whether it's sunny or rainy is beyond his control. "You focus on those things you have control over, and always be prepared to get soaking wet," Hays said.

Hays started the Vibes 13 years ago in Purchase, N.Y., as a tribute to the Grateful Dead rock band, especially its legendary guitarist, Jerry Garcia. Garcia had died the previous year, in 1995. "It all stemmed out of a foundation of the Dead and Jerry Garcia," Hays said. The Grateful Dead was a band known for its live performances that attracted a large group of loyal followers called Deadheads. Hays, who had run a wholesale music cassette tape company with connections to Grateful Dead shows, was one of them. "It was always a lot of fun going on a Dead tour," he said.

The Gathering of the Vibes has been held at various locations in upstate New York as well as Bridgeport.

The Vibes has featured performances by a few former Grateful Dead members such as Bob Weir. This year, former band members Phil Lesh and Bill Kreutzmann will appear with their bands.

In addition to live music, the festival offers food and craft vendors, and an information area with non-profit organizations. Hays said festival organizers operate year-round activities to support charities.

Other top bands playing at this year's Vibes are Umphrey's McGee, Derek Trucks, Mike Gordon of Phish, Sam Grass, and New Riders of the Purple Sage.

Performances are Friday to Sunday, with multiple musicians on stage every day. Tickets range from \$175 for all three days to \$80 for one day. Go to gatheringofthevibes.com for more information.

The organizers have made a limited number of discounted tickets available for Bridgeport residents only. These passes are \$75 and are good for the entire festival, and must be purchased in person at the Black Rock Art Center, 2838 Fairfield Ave. Each sale generates \$5 for the art center; call 367-7917. Identification must be shown to prove Bridgeport residency.