

Mill Race Festival of Traditional Folk Music ending its 26-year run in Cambridge

CAMBRIDGE – The Mill Race Festival of Traditional Folk Music will not be returning to downtown Cambridge.

Since 1993, the festival has hosted local, Canadian and international performers at Mill Race Park along the Grand River and downtown stages near City Hall. The volunteer board organizing the event says it will not proceed again.

“This wasn’t an easy decision, but it was the right decision,” said Brad McEwen, festival founder and artistic director. “We have had a wonderful, 26-year run of presenting fantastic music in a beautiful, historic downtown, but the time is right to say goodbye.”

More than 15,000 people annually were estimated to have attended the festival in recent years, held over the Civic Holiday Weekend in August.

The festival is entirely run by volunteers. It faces the same challenges as other community events in finding people able to help organize the event throughout the year, along with on the days immediately before, during and after the three-day event.

“Our dedicated board, volunteers and our audience are all aging,” McEwen said.

“Without the active participation of younger people, the festival is unable continue.”

McEwen said it was a difficult decision personally, along with for the festival board.

“I personally am literally burned out from the stress that comes with the year-round task of directing this festival and all its events throughout the year.”

Financial concerns also played part in the decision, McEwen said.

Generally, there’s less government and private grant money available to support free-admission community musical events. At the same time, there’s more paperwork required to even attempt to access what funding is available.

While the City of Cambridge has been stalwart supporter of the event – and was ready to support a 2019 festival – it’s unclear how the city will fund community events going forward. And it’s not clear what might happen to any financial support if local government amalgamation unfolds as some people are predicting.

“I have had the enormous pleasure and honour of working with many dedicated and enthusiastic people, both board members who work so very hard throughout the year to make this festival a reality and also those volunteers who spend their long weekend working the event. I cannot thank them enough for all that they have done,” McEwen said.

