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Community groups share concerns over Fiddle Park revitalization project

Pickin' in the Park, Haunt in the Park may need cancel in 2025

Written By PAULA BROWN

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

Organizers from two well-known local events are speaking out about Shelburne council's decision to revitalize Fiddle Park as their plans to host events are thrown into limbo for 2025.

Organizers from Pickin' in the Park and Haunt in the Park submitted letters to Shelburne Town Council on Monday (Oct. 7), expressing their concerns about the Fiddle Park redevelopment and asking the Town to reconsider.

The Little family, who operate the annual Halloween-themed event, known as Haunt in the Park, requested that Council consider their proposal to have the 2025 construction contained to the south side of the pavilion to allow access for the public and volunteers on the north side.

The Little family noted that parking for patrons could be moved to the back field by the dog park and a fenced walkway could be erected to limit access to the construction zone.

?This would allow us to put the Haunt on safely, on dry footing, utilizing already open areas of the park,? wrote the Little family. ?[This would cause] minimal disruption to either the plans the Town of Shelburne has for construction, and to our event that brings in so much to the Town.?

The Haunt in the Park event originally began in 1993 when Bob and Sue Little and their three then-teenage children set up a haunted house on the porch of their First Avenue home. As the family moved homes over the years, the event moved with them until they found its current home at Fiddle Park in 2015.

Preparing for the three-day haunting requires over 1,000 hours of construction and building displays spanning four weeks. On the nights of the haunts, more than 60 volunteers, consisting of family, neighbours, students and community members dress up in characters to bring out screams and laughter for the community.

Last year, Haunt in the Park celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Halloween attraction and saw a historic number of attendees at the event with over 3,000 visitors. As a result, the Little family began investigating the possibility of expanding the event to include another weekend.

?There is no other venue in Shelburne that can accommodate the scale and participation that our event encompasses,? said Carola Little, an organizer for the Haunt in the Park. ?Whether or not we would ever be able to add an extra weekend isn't even the point anymore. It's whether or not we can put on an event at all.?

Speaking with the Free Press, Little said they were given two options from the Town of Shelburne to help relocate the Halloween event, which included using the cattle shelter at the Fairgrounds or putting up a tent in the back half of Fiddle Park.

?Both options that they've presented have grass as a base and 3,000 people through a space in October with rain, sleet and snow on grass is just a disaster waiting to happen. We rely on having the pavilion here at Fiddle Park as an option for us,? she said.

Pickin' in the Park organizers, Greg and Heather Holmes, requested in their letter to Council that the $40,000 donated to the Town of Shelburne in July to have the floor of the pavilion cemented be refunded due to ?non disclosure? about the usage of the space in

2025.

?Needless to say, the representatives, volunteers and attendees of Pickin' in the Park felt betrayed [and] misled that their donation of $40,000, which was given in good faith, would not now benefit the continuation of this event,? the Holmes' family wrote in their letter to Council.

Pickin' in the Park is an annual open mic country music festival started by local residents Greg and Heather Holmes in 2013. The couple started the music event after attending similar ones outside of the community and decided to create a festival for any musician to take the stage.

Since the inception of the music festival, the event has raised over $170,000 to bring improvements to Fiddle Park, including the existing pavilion.

The biggest factor with the decommissioning of the Fiddle Park pavilion and the trailer dump station usage in 2025 for Pickin' in the Park will be finding a space to accommodate their needs. Each year, the event sees around 600 attendees with roughly 200 of them being campers.

?We have literally been kicked out. They think that we can maybe work on a half of the park, but we bring in 200 trailers and it won't work for us at all. With the new construction there is no place to put us,? said Holmes.

Without the usage of Fiddle Park, the Holmes are in the midst of making a few decisions for 2025, including whether the event could move to another location in town, moving the event outside of the community, or just cancelling it altogether.

?Everything worked perfectly for years and now we're basically starting over again,? said Holmes.

In 2021 and 2022, the Town of Shelburne launched an online community survey to gather input from residents on specific activities and programs they would like to see as part of the revitalization project of Fiddle Park.

According to the Fiddle Park Plan, a total of 481 participants responded to the online survey in 2021 and a total of 113 participants gave feedback in 2022.

The Town of Shelburne has a population 8,994, according to 2021 census data.

Three concept options were developed for the project based on community input from the survey.

Components of the draft plan presented to council on June 2023 included a multi-functional trail with all-season usage such as walking and biking as well as skating. It also included an amphitheatre, pavilion, playground, multi-use court, community plaza, memorial forest and enhanced parking lot.

The $9.4 million project was slated to take five to 20 years to start and complete.

?As far as the project plans, some of them might have worked with us, but this one is the worst one for us; it puts us right out because we have no room for camping,? said Holmes.

Little added that while they're also concerned for the future of the events as organizers, they're not completely against the revitalization project as a whole going forward.

?It's not that we have a problem with them wanting to do things out there at the park, we would just be encouraging the consideration of leaving it a somewhat flexible space instead of closing it in so tight that we wouldn't have many options, going forward for other events,? concluded Little.

?The parks got to change and a few things have to be added, but I think they're getting a little overboard on their plans,? said Holmes.