

## The Virginian-Pilot

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### *Other Views*

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## Being a good neighbor, NSU turned down festival

The Southeastern Virginia Arts Association invited Norfolk State University in September to host the 2009 Afr'Am Fest. NSU has spent considerable time on the preparations for the festival, which usually is held over the Memorial Day weekend.



We began the discussions with this important caveat: Unless our community neighbors supported this venue, NSU would not participate. Out of respect for those neighbors and NSU's ongoing commitment to be good neighbors and good citizens, we have notified SEVAA in writing and within the 90-day notice period required by the memorandum of understanding that NSU will not host this year's festival.

NSU entered into conversations and later signed the MOU with the arts group with the sole intent of 1) supporting the city of Norfolk and SEVAA in continuing to hold the well-established festival in Norfolk, and 2) enhancing community relations within the city.

We thought we were being good citizens and serving the city and SEVAA, as well as being patrons of the arts. We knew when NSU entered into the discussions with SEVAA there would be no financial benefit for the university, but we felt the good relations would be, as the commercial says, "priceless."

Here's a brief history of what transpired beginning last fall:

The first community meeting with our neighboring civic groups on Nov. 3 opened with this caveat being explicitly stated: If they didn't support the event, NSU wouldn't take part. Representatives from the civic associations of Broad Creek, Central Brambleton, Chesterfield Heights, Ingleside, Middle Towne Arch and Stonebridge attended.

The results of this initial meeting, organized by NSU, were used as the basis for the development of the MOU and the subsequent plans being developed by Norfolk State.

Even though community relations are designated in the MOU as the purview of SEVAA, NSU orchestrated several community meetings. University officials also placed notification of meetings in residents' doors, incorporated their feedback as far as possible, and even worked with community leaders — so we thought — in developing detailed safety and security plans. NSU sincerely appreciates those individuals who collaborated in good faith with us.

SEVAA representatives at the Feb. 3 Norfolk City Council meeting did not comment or inform the council and the citizens there of the proactive role NSU made in engaging the community before a decision was made. Instead, at the campus press conference on Feb. 5, SEVAA leaders commented that their boards and their supporters would be upset if they had.

NSU had never had any intention to go forward with any activity of this magnitude without the city's support. We were led to believe that the city and SEVAA agreed in extending the initial invitation to NSU to be the site for the festival. Apparently that was not the case.

In my remarks at the press conference, I stated that we had flubbed this opportunity. Indeed we did — all of us involved flubbed what could have been a spectacular example of municipal, institutional and nonprofit cooperation for the promotion of the arts and to benefit all.

Once more, in my view, NSU gets the public blame for an intended good deed.

We wish the city and SEVAA all of the best and will continue to support Afr'Am Fest. NSU will also continue to engage our neighboring communities.

**Carolyn W. Meyers** is president of Norfolk State University.