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OPINION - *Our views*

NSU sends Afr'Am festival on the road again

Norfolk State University officials had become defensive. Residents living near the college were upset over NSU's plans to host the always-popular Afr'Am Fest this Memorial Day weekend, and university leaders felt they were being vilified for coming to the festival's rescue.

The event had to move from the city's Town Point Park, its regular venue, because of a multimillion-dollar renovation there.

Ultimately, though, NSU made the right call. The university canceled its agreement with the Southeastern Virginia Arts Association, citing complaints by neighbors and concerns over parking, congestion, safety and security. President Carolyn W. Meyers said conditions in a memorandum of understanding with SEVAA had not been met.

The concerns were legitimate. Even on heavily attended Saturday football games, the area in and around the campus becomes crowded. The music and arts festival, which began in 1983, has attracted an estimated 300,000 people over the three-day weekend along Waterside Drive and in the park. It was bound to cause controversy when trying to transplant it to tighter quarters so close to residential neighborhoods.

"It is with great regret the [u]niversity had to come to this decision," Meyers said in a statement. "NSU viewed the possibility of hosting the Afr'Am Fest as a mechanism for enhancing community engagement, for supporting the arts activities in our city, and for demonstrating good citizenship with the City of Norfolk through working with SEVAA."

The cancellation will force SEVAA and Mark Madison, the Afr'Am Fest director, to scramble to find either an alternative location or date. Town Point Park, for example, is scheduled to reopen in July. Madison said over the weekend his group still wants to hold the event this year, but he declined to elaborate this week. One obvious concern is whether vendors and musical acts will back out.

Daun Hester, a Norfolk City Council member, said communication among all the parties involved in organizing the event was "not as good as it should have been." But she said the city, which has regularly allocated money to the event, should step up to assist SEVAA again. Hester said Afr'Am Fest

is the organization's major fundraiser and supports arts programs in the region.

For its part, NSU has pledged to hold regular meetings with civic leagues to increase communications between the university and its neighbors. The first is scheduled on Monday. If that effort had been in place, festival backers and the university might have avoided this controversy entirely.