

## The Virginian-Pilot

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By Denise Watson Batts, Harry Minium, Malcolm Venable

### NORFOLK

Afr'Am Fest officials plan to announce this week that their popular Memorial Day weekend music festival will be moved from downtown to Norfolk State University.

But the impending announcement has already upset several City Council members and some residents living adjacent to the campus who say the festival, which drew 300,000 people last year, is too big for the historically black university.

After hearing from nine residents Tuesday night who protested the move to NSU, Mayor Paul Fraim, Vice Mayor Anthony L. Burfoot and Councilman Paul R. Riddick said the city should consider withholding \$40,000 in city funding.

Riddick suggested that NSU cancel its planned announcement about the event Thursday. Council members also requested that City Manager Regina V.K. Williams meet with NSU officials to discuss the city's concerns.

Because Norfolk State is a state university, the city has no control over whether it hosts Afr'Am Fest.

"This is the wrong place to hold this festival," Burfoot said.

Burfoot and others say the event will cause parking, noise, traffic and security problems for surrounding communities, which include Stonebridge Crossing, Middle Towne Arch and Broad Creek.

The festival's exact site on campus will be unveiled at a news conference planned for Thursday, but Mark Madison, Afr'Am Fest's director, said the group anticipates using the football stadium, its parking lot and an area stretching toward Park Avenue.

Mamie Johnson, who heads the Broad Creek Civic League, said she and other residents feel left out of festival plans.

"Community leaders were not asked to provide input, and that was a mistake," she said.

Harold Perkins, a Middle Towne Arch civic leader, said Norfolk State and city officials are working to alleviate residents' concerns.

"We want to be supportive of Afr'Am Fest and Norfolk State," he said.

Festival and Norfolk State officials said they have been meeting since the fall to address neighborhood concerns. Additional security, shuttle service and workers to clean up after the festival - provisions provided at previous festivals - also will be in place at the school, and the festival will be an hour shorter than in the past, NSU spokeswoman Sharon Hoggard said.



Crowds gather in Towne Point Park in Norfolk during AFR'AM Fest on a balmy and humid mid-80 degree afternoon in 2007. (The Virginian-Pilot file photo)

"We will do everything in our power to make sure the festival is safe, secure and as unobtrusive as possible for an event of this scale," she said.

Madison said he is shocked that some are still upset.

"I'm dismayed, because we've been in conversations on and off with civic organizations," he said.

Afr'Am Fest officials said they approached Norfolk State officials after they learned that Town Point Park would not be available. The park is undergoing an \$11.5 million renovation and won't reopen until early July.

The festival, a celebration of African American music and culture, is second only to Harborfest, the city's oldest downtown festival, in annual attendance.

Williams said she offered Afr'Am Fest officials other dates at Town Point Park, but they declined.

When she learned the festival would be held at Norfolk State, Williams said, she offered to continue the \$40,000 city contribution to help cover some of the festival's expenses, including a shuttle service that would bring attendants to and from the campus from downtown parking lots.

Burfoot said that when asked recently to attend the planned news conference, he declined and instead met with residents in Stonebridge Crossing, Middle Towne Arch and Broad Creek.

Riddick said he has received numerous calls from concerned residents. "I support Norfolk State and Afr'Am Fest," Riddick said. "But in this case, I'm on the side of the community. It was very shortsighted on their part for not involving the community in this decision. A festival this large isn't going to work in this neighborhood."

Residents have complained for years about traffic jams before and after Norfolk State football games, which at most draw about 30,000 spectators.

"Even if they just draw half of 300,000 people, it's going to be a nightmare," Burfoot said.

Madison said Afr'Am has no plans to make Norfolk State a permanent site. They chose the school

because it's a historically black university, and the celebration of African American history and culture was an obvious fit, he said.

Because of the new location and the economy, Madison said, they're expecting significantly fewer

attendees but are bracing for the normal crowd. They plan to steer traffic away from residential neighborhoods and have created a Web site to address concerns that should go live Thursday, Madison said.

*Harry Minium, (757) 446-2371, [harry.minium@pilotonline.com](mailto:harry.minium@pilotonline.com)*

*Denise Batts, (757) 446-2504, [denise.batts@pilotonline.com](mailto:denise.batts@pilotonline.com)*

*Malcolm Venable, (757) 446-2662, [malcolm.venable@pilotonline.com](mailto:malcolm.venable@pilotonline.com) [1]*