

STAYING INFORMED: The Liberty Bank Riverfront Amphitheater

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ALTON - According to a poll created by Riverbender.com last Thursday, March 23, the majority of respondents approved of the way the Liberty Bank Riverfront Amphitheater is being used (57.88 percent), but a large minority (32.14 percent) said they were unsatisfied with the way the amphitheater is currently being used.

When Riverbender.com requested comments from the public, several came into the inbox. The majority of them were from people across the area, both private individuals and representatives from community organizations, saying they have had bad experiences with the Liberty Bank Riverfront Amphitheater, especially when trying to

book local events. No emails in favor of the amphitheater were received, showing that large minority is very vocal.

All four of the candidates running for mayor (Scott Dixon, Joshua Young, Dan Rauschkolb and current Alton Mayor Brant Walker) have said something about the amphitheater. In fact, the amphitheater is one of Dixon's most prevalent critiques of the Walker administration, saying it should be utilized more by locals.

Young went on the record on several occasions saying he would like to see more diverse acts playing the amphitheater, instead of country acts such as [Charlie Daniels Band](#) and 1990s alternative pop rock groups like [Sugar Ray](#) and [Smash Mouth](#). At [Alton Main Street's candidate forum](#), held on Wednesday, March 15, Young said he would like to see more hip-hop and reggae groups, which he said would better reflect Alton's true demographics.

Amphitheater Commissioner Robert Stephan and Walker agree with both points. Walker said more than 40 dates were open last year for the amphitheater's usage, saying Altonians are welcome to call and book both ticketed and non ticketed events at the park. Both Walker and Setphan said they would like to see more than country bands playing the amphitheater as well. In fact, Stephan said the city tried to get such diverse acts as [Kool and the Gang](#), [Young the Giant](#), [Barenaked Ladies](#) and the [Violent Femmes](#), but things did not come to pass as the commission or city may have wanted.

Why are there so many country bands playing?



In fact, the city works with St. Louis-based promotions company Evtiv to bring these national acts to Alton, but the conditions must be nearly perfect for the commission to be able to book a band. Stephan said the acts must be able to be priced within the commission's range, which is between \$250-275,000 a year for shows.

"We can easily go through that in just two shows if we aren't careful," Walker said.

The City of Alton itself does not provide money for the shows at the amphitheater. All money for shows comes from sponsorship as well as profit generated from those shows. More costs than just band booking go into each event, however, Stephan said, making the costs increase dramatically.

When the amphitheater was built, it lacked restroom facilities as well as proper fencing around it for ticketed events. Because of the amphitheater's openness and lack of facilities, the cost to host national events increases. Stephan and Walker said the amphitheater must have portable restrooms, fencing and even event security - all of which comes at a cost. Additionally, many events require good lighting and sound, which Stephan said were essential, if expensive.

"We had people promoting this amphitheater for us," he said. "Our promoter actually went door-to-door in Los Angeles, just to tell people about Alton. Agents don't want their bands to play in places without proper security, lighting and sound."

Stephan and Walker said some of the amphitheater's early events lacked some of these essentials, meaning they did not leave a good impression on agents or bands. Walker used the example of a promise of a VIP tent meaning more than "simply a beer tent with a keg inside of it." Stephan also said early shows at the amphitheater lacked the proper sound system and manager, which made the event hard to bear.

Once the amphitheater commission established rules and regulations regarding the quality of shows held at the amphitheater, Stephan said the commission ran into a new set of stipulations regarding how a band could be booked. Several factors must come together, like a jigsaw falling into place, in order for a national act to be able to play Alton. Because of these factors, Walker and Stephan said the city has hosted mostly country acts - due to how accessible they are.

Besides the budget, the city must also select a band, which would bring enough in ticket sales to justify spending their cost. Stephan said the commission compares the bands' performances in similar sized amphitheaters across the Midwest to get a good idea of

what they can expect to gross from the band coming to Alton. This only narrows the field to several dozen possibilities for bands to play Alton.

Following that model, the amphitheater commission and promoter must look through the available dates of both the amphitheater and the possible bands. Stephan said the commission tries to bring national acts into town on weekends - a very costly proposition, assuming the band is not passing through the area.

"That's actually how we ended up getting Sugar Ray," Stephan said. "They went to Red Rocks after Alton, and were staying the night in St. Louis anyway. They were coming back through from Peoria."

Because Alton was on the way, Sugar Ray decided to play - at a significantly reduced rate. A similar condition led to Alton getting to host what is left of Lynyrd Skynyrd, Walker has said in previous interviews with Riverbender.com.

Despite both Walker's and Stephan's preferences for other genres of music than country, Walker said even hosting country music acts has helped leave an impact on Alton's economy. Since the city does not have to pay for any acts at the amphitheater, it is able to reap the benefits of people coming into Alton from across the region to catch national acts, without accepting the liability for something failing to meet expectations. That liability is absorbed by the commission and promotions company.

Why do the large events not host local food and drink vendors?

Currently, Madison-based food vendor, Pit Stop Concessions, has the contract as the amphitheater's food provider for large ticketed events. That contract came through a bidding system, Walker said, and said Pit Stop was the only vendor who went for a bid - both in 2014, and more recently this year. Walker said Pit Stop was not the only one interested, however.

"We had a lot of people come ask us about it," he said. "Overall, though, no one wanted to take the risk."

That risk is similar to the risk the city avoids by booking shows through the amphitheater. The City of Alton and its dwindling budget are not liable for any food waste, which may be accrued at an unsuccessful show. Because of the size of these shows, which can accommodate more than 3,000 people, the city would be accepting substantial risks for providing as much food as may be needed, especially if it does not sell.

Pit Stop Concessions gives the city 25 percent of its gross income following every event. Stephan said, even with Pit Stop being the amphitheater's official concessions provider, local businesses could vend at events, but they would have to go through Pit Stop Concessions to do so. Pit Stop Concessions may allow a local business to vend there, but that business may have to pay Pit Stop Concessions from their gross or upfront to do so.

For smaller events, however, Stephan said Pit Stop Concessions would probably not want to provide food service. Pit Stop Concessions would have to make that decision, however, because they have first right of refusal for amphitheater events.

Can anyone book a large, ticketed national event at the amphitheater, or can only Evntiv do it?

Just as Pit Stop Concessions has first right of refusal for food vendors, Evntiv has first right of refusal for show booking. If there is a date or band with which Evntiv has no interest, Stephan and Walker agreed someone would be able to host a ticketed event at the amphitheater - even featuring a national act.

"We're in talks with Evntiv about how we could bring more outside shows to the amphitheater now," Stephan said.

How can someone book an event at the amphitheater?

At the Liberty Bank Riverfront Amphitheater's website, there is a tab at the top called "[Book an Event](#)." Once that tab has been selected, a copy of the amphitheater's [ticketed event contract](#) may be viewed by clicking a link on the bottom left of the page. Stephan said this process and the contract are the usual for amphitheaters of this size in towns of this size booking bands of this size.

Here are some of what is required through the ticketed event section of the contract:

- A **NON-REFUNDABLE** (contract's emphasis) booking fee of \$100 is required to reserve an event date, and the city reserves the right to change or cancel the event date in writing to the promoter
- Renter must have bank letter/statement verifying minimum \$10,000 on account to ensure costs will be covered.
- Pit Stop Concessions has first right of refusal for all non city events
- Event security will be hired by promoter. Alton Police Chief reserves the right to determine the number of security personnel required with a minimum of 12 from an Illinois licensed approved agency. Volunteer security is not allowed.

- **Must use official Eventiv ticketing procedures** (contract's emphasis), such as Metrotix.
- According to Ordinance 7126, 4-8-2009, a tax levied and imposed upon all amusements within the city at a rate of five percent of the purchase price of a ticket of admission for each person entering the premises of a place of amusement for the purpose of witnessing, viewing or participating in the amusement. It is the responsibility of the promoter to collect the amusement tax and report and pay the amount.
- The City of Alton Parks and Recreation Department reserves the right to determine cleaning requirements for each event. A \$200 cleaning charge applies.
- Porta Potties will be required and must be located in approved areas. One porta potty per 75 people per four hour event.
- If VIP area is used, this area shall be returned to the original clean state. If alcohol is served, it will not leave this area. No one under 21 is admitted to the area.
- All event promoters must carry event insurance for not less than \$1 million general liability/\$2 million aggregate. Insurance certificate must also list the City of Alton as additional insured.
- Eventiv has first right of refusal for all production.
- ***No duct tape is allowed on any fixture at the amphitheater*** (emphasis: contract's)
- ***No drilling or taping to pillar structures and stage floor will be allowed. No pyrotechnics, concrete blocks, cannons, flames, etc. will be allowed. Confetti in any form is expressly forbidden in the Riverfront Amphitheater*** (emphasis: contract's)

How much would all of this cost a promoter trying to book a ticketed event at the amphitheater?

Stephan said these requirements, which are some of many, are partially required because of the standards to which the amphitheater must adhere in order for national acts such as Smash Mouth and Sugar Ray to consider playing it as a venue. He said these regulations are no different than what other places across the region and entire Midwest would require for ticketed events.

That being said, here are the costs for a ticketed event at the Alton Amphitheater for any promoter:

- Full Facility rental: \$1,500-\$3,000 (based on number of attendees)
- Non refundable booking fee: \$100
- Refundable damage deposit: \$1,000-\$1,500 (based on number of attendees)
- Porta Potties: \$65 each (minimum of one per 75 people for four hours)
- Backstage fence: \$380
- Ticket booth set-up: \$220

- Janitorial supplies: \$80
- Stage electricity (five hours): \$500
- Stage electricity (wedding only two hours): \$200
- Bike racks set up for stage (if needed, but required for attendance over 1,000): \$220
- Bike racks: \$300
- Event set-up (includes 10 vendor set-up): \$320
- Supervisor (18 hours): \$630
- Clean-Up (eight at \$12.50/hour x two hours): \$200
- Required security (10 minimum unless otherwise required by Alton Police Chief): \$1,200

At the bare minimum, using the lowest amount of possible attendees and two hours of electricity, booking an event would cost as much as \$5,655, but \$1,000 would be returned following the show as the damage deposit. This is not counting the \$10,000 required to have on hand to even rent the event. If someone wanted to book an event with all the amenities, including bike racks, the number would be closer to \$11,250 with \$1,500 returning from a damage deposit. That number was also calculated using the minimum number of security personnel, which again is at the discretion of the chief.

These expenses are also taken before the band's expenses can even be calculated. Because of these prices, several complaints coming to Riverbender.com regarding the amphitheater's inaccessibility to local band shows may be valid. However, Stephan and Walker said the impact or national acts coming to Alton's economy has been nothing short of incredible. As Walker has said in various candidate forums, the amphitheater has generated as much as \$3 million in economic impact in Alton, according to the Alton Conventions and Visitors Bureau.

"People are coming to Alton to see these shows, and we're getting coverage on St. Louis radio," he said. "Some people have said restaurant owners are upset about the way the amphitheater is ran, but I have not met any who say that to me. All of them I have talked to said they love the shows. People go out to eat before the shows, and go out late afterwards. People are coming to Alton because of the shows we're having at the amphitheater and learning Alton can be a good time."

I've seen things like church services being held at the amphitheater. Are those as expensive as ticketed events?

On the amphitheater's website, a [second contract](#) for non-ticketed events is also hosted. These events may include church services or non-profit events, such as the Tour de Cure, which are sometimes held at the amphitheater.

In the non-ticketed event contract, a non-refundable \$100 booking fee is also required, as are porta potties at the same ratio (one per every 75 people per four hour event). Same rules also apply for cleaning, including the \$200 fee. Pit Stop Concessions and Eventiv also hold first right of refusal on non-ticketed events.



However, the non-ticketed event contract still maintains insurance requirements. Promoters are still required to carry event insurance for not less than \$1 million in general liability and \$2 million in aggregate.

Similar fees are required for non-ticketed events as well, including a \$1,000 rental fee for less than 1,000 attendees and \$1,500 for more. A refundable damage deposit is also required, as are several of the other fees associated with ticketed events. Some of these fees, however, may be able to be negotiated with the amphitheater commission.

"When someone sends us an application, they can either discuss us with it at our meetings, or speak with a member of the amphitheater commission," Stephan said. "Depending on what they want, it can take as little as 10 or 20 minutes to get the thing started and booked. Some of the church services only cost a few hundred dollars, and people don't need to pay for expenses they really don't need. Most things can be done or solved by simply giving us a call or sending us an application. We try to work things out with everybody. Of all the events, which have come to us over the years, I think we have only rejected one."

Who is a part of the amphitheater commission, and why does it exist?



Besides Stephan, the Liberty Bank Riverfront Amphitheater Commission also includes Michelle Brooks, Judy Egelhoff, Ruth Birmingham, Brett Stawar and Karen Baker Brncic. Stephan and Walker said the commission exists ultimately to save the city money. They are a working commission, meaning they do commission work on a volunteer basis. If the commission did not exist, Stephan said the city may have to pay someone as much as \$65,000 a year to join the Alton Parks and Recreation Department (which is already working with half the budget and staff it had a decade ago) to do the work of the commission.

"People talk about returning the amphitheater to the city, but the city can't afford to keep it going the way it operates now," Stephan said.

The amphitheater commission utilizes funds generated from events held at the amphitheater to create more shows. The city does not pay for the shows from its budget, nor does the city collect revenue from the concerts in its general fund, outside of the taxes collected from both ticket sales and commerce driven by show-goers visiting local eateries (and drinkeries) before and after each event.

So, for the 6.39 percent of poll-takers on the Riverbender.com homepage who honestly answered, "I do not understand enough about how the amphitheater is managed to have an opinion on the matter," this should help.

For the 3.59 percent who answered "I appreciate the events, but wish it had more local control," the reason why it does not is because of Alton's chronically dismal budget issues.

For those who said "I am satisfied with the various events held throughout the year. I think it is being utilized very well," which was 57.88 percent of responses, this is a look at the high standards the city and commission must uphold to lure national acts to play Alton, which may come at the expense of local availability sometimes.

For those 161 voters (32.14 percent) who are unhappy with the way it is currently managed, this should provide a list of things, which could be changed through establishing a dialogue with the amphitheater commission. Stephan said the commission is open to local input and possible changes to make it better for everyone.