

Business

Baltimore ethnic festivals generate economic, cultural impact

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While no official study has been done to determine the economic impact of Baltimore's annual ethnic festivals, the anecdotal evidence strongly suggest that the impact is big. For instance, nearly half a million people attended last month's three-day African American Heritage Festival.

But dollars and cents aren't what matter most to some organizers.

The festivals have an "impact that goes well beyond what can be measured in economic terms," said Chrysovalantis Kefalas, who served as a volunteer public relations officer for the St. Nicholas Greek Folk Festival, which drew roughly 10,000 patrons this year.

"The St. Nicholas Greek Folk Festival, like other ethnic neighborhood festivals, certainly contributes to the economic and cultural wealth of the Baltimore metropolitan region," Kefalas said. "It contributes to the quality of life in Baltimore and in Maryland by strengthening the community, providing a unique event, building awareness of the Greek culture and acting as a source of community pride."

Baltimore will host 12 ethnic festivals this year, from the Polish festival in June to the Russian festival in October.

Whatever the festivals produce in terms of economic impact, the government's return on investment is huge because public sector support is relatively small.

"If you have a festival and use city services such as sanitation, police, public works, transportation etc., then the city will charge you for the work," said Baltimore Office of Promotion & The Arts Communications Director Tracy Baskerville. "The ethnic festivals only pay 10 percent of the bills from the various city agencies."

The African American Heritage Festival, for example, applied for and received a \$15,000 grant from the Office of Promotion for advertising and marketing fees, Baskerville said.

But the lion's share of support for the festivals comes from charitable contributions and volunteer labor.

"If it wasn't for the volunteers, we'd have a hard time putting this thing together," said Halina Maliszewsky, a member of the Polish Community Association of Maryland.

"Our church family of parishioners volunteer their time and energy to prepare for this event, said Russian festival Co-Chairman Art Lisowsky, who will celebrate the 33rd annual event Oct. 20-22. "For weeks prior to the festival, we are working together to be ready for this important activity of our church."

While community volunteers are useful in keeping expenses low, the Office of Promotion & The Arts supports festivals by providing advertisement banner locations, food booths, permits and electricity outlets, Baskerville said.

Entrance fees are another method used to cover expenses and induce profits.

Admission charges are used as donations, said Maliszewsky. "We don't look to make money; we just look to put the festival on year to year. Most of the time we just make enough to start off next year's festival," she said.

Approximately \$45,000 is needed to sponsor the Baltimore American Indian Center's annual powwow, said volunteer finance officer Jovina Chavis. Once expenses are paid out of a \$15,000 estimated return, roughly \$3,000 remains to fund other of the organization's initiatives, said Chavis, who will be celebrating the 32nd annual powwow at Patterson Park Aug. 25-27.

A profitable festival depends on several factors, including sponsorship contributions, admission fees, and fundraiser avenues, said Nigerian Youth Association of Maryland President Toun Olumide of the annual Naija Fest.

One thing for certain is that "the festival is a profitable venture for African small business owners as they get a chance to display and promote their goods and services," Olumide said.

Local businesses often benefit from the thousands of dollars spent on merchandise for the festival as well. The Russian festival purchases imported beer and vodka from local suppliers, Lisowsky said.

ETHNIC FESTIVALS

June 2-4: Polish Festival
June 9-11: St. Nicholas Greek Folk Festival
June 16-18: African American Heritage Festival
June 24-25: LatinoFest
July 14-16: Caribbean Carnival Festival, Druid Hill Park, 410-230-2969
August 5-6: International Festival, Poly/Western High School parking lot, 410-396-3141
August 12: Nigerian Festival, Patterson Park, 410-608-0420
August 25-27: Powwow Native American Festival, Patterson Park, 410-675-3535
September 9-10: Ukrainian Festival, Patterson Park, 410-687-3465
September 15-16: Irish Festival of Baltimore, Canton Waterfront Park and Du Burns Center, 410-558-4640
September 23: Korean American Festival, War Memorial Plaza, 410-625-2442
October 20-22: Russian Festival, Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Church, 410-276-6171
Source: Baltimore Office of Promotion & The Arts

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