Chamber ends Festival on the Bay
Summer offering discontinued after 17 years

PETOSKEY — The leaders of the Petoskey Regional Chamber of Commerce say they’re discontinuing a 17-year summer tradition.

Following a recent vote by the chamber’s board of directors, Petoskey’s annual Festival on the Bay will not return next year. In a press release this week, chamber president Carlin Smith said the decision to dissolve the festival was a difficult one. But, amid financial challenges — largely attributed to waning sponsorship revenue — the yearly celebration ran out of steam. The event took place throughout Petoskey’s Bayfront Park, and featured waterfront activities, live music, food vendors and inflatable play facilities.

“We probably should have ended it after 2018, but we tried one more year to turn things around and we weren’t successful,” Smith said in the press release. “We lost money in three of the last five years, and the festival’s savings were depleted.”

He added that the chamber couldn’t continue to “assume the financial risk of continuing to try to turn it around.”

The decision was made late September.

In a followup phone interview with the News-Review, Smith noted that sponsor-
ship issues seem to be systemic among other organizations around the area that put on such community-type events. He said the number of groups sponsoring the event tended to remain roughly the same, but those groups began to make smaller and smaller contributions.

Additionally, the festival ran into issues with declining numbers of volunteers.

The festival launched in 2003 as a way to increase tourism and business activity during the late-August "shoulder season." Roughly four years prior, a study conducted on behalf of Downtown Petoskey had suggested a signature citywide festival could help to accomplish that goal. Initially, the festival combined existing community events such as the Petoskey Jazz Festival, the Petoskey Area Jaycees Arts and Crafts Show, and the Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council Lake Expo, with additional activities such as Shepler's Bay Cruises, the canoe races, a Petoskey stone hunt, and a "Celebration of the Sunset."

In the following years, the festival became an increasingly popular Northern Michigan attraction, bringing in musical acts such as Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels, the Mud Bugs, the Accidents and Laith Al-Saadi. The Petoskey Steel Drum Band also performed every year.

Sam Zielinski (front right) receives a balloon from a clown while sister Abby and parents, Joe and Kendra, look on during Festival on the Bay in August 2019.

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Carlin Smith, chamber president

In past years the festival featured train rides, tall ships, petting zoos, chalk art, duck races, a Shakespeare troupe and street performers.

"We always tried to stay away from the traditional festival events like parades and fireworks and focused more on getting people down to our waterfront area to show off Petoskey's beauty," chamber communications director Nikki Devitt said in the press release. "We were always proud of the festival's quality and its quaintness."

Roughly 100 people volunteered each year to bring the festival to fruition, according to past News-Review reports. According to the press release, specific leaders and organizers include first chamber chairperson Gail Smith; former downtown director Tammy Alvaro; former Petoskey parks and recreation director Parks Al Hansen; current parks and recreation director Kendall Klingelsmith; Nikki Devitt and Lisa Hoyt of the chamber; Roger Tallman; Kathy Bards; Marcie Wolf; and Johnnie Walker.

"We'll miss it for sure, but we can now shift our energy toward strengthening some other chamber programs and toward looking for that next new thing," Smith said.

Smith told the News-Review those other avenues will likely include more educational programming for businesses and staff members.

"We've had good success with that segment of our programming in the past, and we're hoping to continue that," he said.