

Revisiting Gallery Night?

It would be incredibly difficult for anyone to argue that the seven Gallery Night events each year are not a roaring success by practically any definition. The number of these events held annually has doubled since the Downtown Improvement Board (DIB) assumed responsibility for the events yet again two years ago. The average number of official participating businesses that feature a local or regional artist for the evening has grown from around 30 to almost 50 each time the event is held. Just two years ago, the number of attendees numbered between five and eight thousand per event. During the past year, crowds have grown to a point where the event has not had less than ten thousand attendees and in some months actually doubled that number. Palafox and Government Streets are now closed for the duration of the event to help accommodate the crowds. Many downtown businesses rate the seven Friday Gallery Night events among their best sales days of the year. It has become a can't miss day on the calendar for thousands of locals and visitors alike. All of the above are phenomenal intended outcomes.

But with all winning and high-profile efforts, some want even more of a great thing. It's only human nature to want more pleasure and enjoyment. Suggestions have been made to hold more Gallery Nights during the year. Others think the event should be extended to midnight or until the last bar closes. These voices have gotten louder with each successful and enjoyable Gallery Night. Consideration of these suggestions has occurred multiple times at the DIB Special Events Committee and the monthly meetings of the Downtown Advisory Board. In all instances, any additional changes to the event require more money. Or to put it another way, more cash sponsorships for the costs that can't be covered by the official participating businesses and the DIB.

Please consider the fact that all of the costs for each Gallery Night event are shared by the number of "official participants" for that evening. These 40 to 50 downtown businesses (all of which are small locally owned enterprises) share the necessary expenses (\$4000 per event) associated with just organizing and presenting Gallery Night for the four hours that it traditionally lasts. They also provide space in their establishment for a local or regional artist to set-up and display their talent during the evening – at no charge to the artist. Within the past year and a half, a lot of DIB staff time and committee volunteer hours have gone into finding sponsorships to cover the mandated costs (\$2500 per event) to also close Palafox Street and Government Street to vehicular traffic during the four hours of the event. This has been a lot more challenging than the casual attendee might realize. For the forty to fifty businesses that help pay for these costs as "official participants", there are almost always twenty or so others that stay open and take advantage of the crowds but leave the burden of paying for the necessary costs to their neighbors. Many of the small local businesses that do help pay the expenses of Gallery Night as "official participants" are not able to also help pay for the mandated costs associated with closing the streets to vehicular traffic during the events. Fortunately and with a lot of arm twisting, sponsorships for the street closings have been secured from outside interests that desire to share the exposure that Gallery Night brings or from local philanthropists.

Presenting more than seven Gallery Nights or extending the hours of the event are not out of the question or off the table for further consideration. However, given the limited resources available from the "official participants" to help do so and the difficulty in securing street closing sponsors to date, any reasonable person would ask "Where will the extra \$6500 come from for every additional Gallery Night? Where will the additional and extra \$2800 per event come from to keep the streets closed just three more hours to midnight? At the present, there are no realistic answers. All of these

concerns are growing pains of a very successful downtown event. For that, we should be thrilled. But short of a major cash sponsor writing a check to cover the real mandated costs of presenting the event, we will all just have to be content with Gallery Night as it is currently planned and programmed. Oh by the way, while we are wishing for more of a good thing, be sure to thank (and patronize) those small local establishments that do step-up already as “official participants” and make Gallery Night possible for us all to enjoy - seven times each year.

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