

# New nonprofit group will contract with Watts-Up

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Changes in how the Farmington Founders Festival will operate have been in the making for well over a year.

In late 1997, the chamber of commerce board of directors reviewed its purpose and mission.

"We had to ask if this meets our overall mission," said chamber president Carleigh Flaherty in November 1998. "We assessed this from the point of view that this is a membership organization — does it meet the needs of our membership. We are a leading advocate for business. While

the festival may be good for our downtown merchants, is it good for all of our members?"

Also, the festival has not been a money maker for the chamber. That's why the chamber started its popular car raffle in the 1980s. But still the raffle did not annually cover the cost of the festivals.

With the planned changes for the festival, chamber officials have pushed hard to draw in community organizations — those that have traditionally benefited from the festival. Representatives of those organizations serve on the 34-member festival board.

"We're really seeing some momentum from these groups," Flaherty said.

While the chamber is getting out of the festival business, it will continue to retain the car raffle as a means of generating revenue for the chamber.

Chamber officials remain committed to providing seed money to the changing festival on a sliding scale over five years.

Under a contract with Watts-Up, the festival board will agree to a guaranteed fee, plus commission on new sponsors. Mike Watts told the executive board that finances for a festival come from sponsors and rental of space, plus a percentage of sales from groups participating in the festival.

"We feel these groups are getting value from the festival. And

**"I think the Founders Festival has tremendous potential, if you give people a reason to come here, they will love it."**

**Mike Watts**  
—Watts-Up owner

we need revenues for the event," said Mike Watts.

For example, it costs about \$150,000 to put on the Plymouth International Ice Spectacular, Watts said.

"I think the Founders Festival has tremendous potential," Watts said. "If you give people a reason to come here, they will love it."

In the past few years, the festival has found itself up against stiff competition with other communities' events, explained Jody Soronen, former chamber president in November. Soronen was the kingpin behind the festival for the past 16 years.

The festival, however, was not initiated by the chamber alone. The festival was started 34 years

ago as a means to put some fresh air into the mid-summer doldrums in retail.

At first the chamber was one of many entities behind the festival. But as time went on, volunteers who organized and ran the festival got burned out. In the late 1980s, it was suggested that the chamber take over the festival. And it did — with most efforts coming from Soronen, who created a handbook for the festival before she resigned and moved onto a new career path recently.

"Then it became our baby but we always had volunteers. We always had to do some kind of fund raising to support the festival."

## Festival from page A1

The Farmington Founders Festival needs to be more of a community outreach.

The changing festival will be under the watchful eye of a 34-member Founders Festival Board, which is comprised of local business leaders and representatives of Farmington and Farmington Hills civic organizations.

An eight-member executive group — members of the larger festival board — recently decided to hire Watts-Up on a three-year contract to administer the festival. That contract includes soliciting new sponsors, providing staff and technical support for entertainment, the parade, Showmobile, arts and crafts and to develop new attractions for the event.

"I like this area. It has all the components (necessary for success). There's a great core of people. It's a growth area," said Mike Watts, who is well-known for revamping the popular annual Plymouth International Ice Sculpture Spectacular each January.

### Other events

Watts-Up also puts on the Downtown Hoedown and the PraiseFest, and recently organized a 60th birthday bash for rock star Ted Nugent.

The changes that will begin with this year's festival are expected to breathe new life into the festival, which is designed to involve Farmington Hills, as well as Farmington, particularly the downtown.

"We want to tie in both communities," said Farmington City Manager Frank Lauhoff, executive board member.

One way of doing that will be to include the Hills' fireworks display July 4 as the grand opening of the almost weeklong festival, which will run through July 10.

Still on tap will be the annual Miss Farmington pageant, as well as the parade, arts and crafts and entertainment and Kids Day, and the chamber's car raffle. The circus hosted by Farmington Hills last year will now become an event within the festival, as will a new event sponsored by the Multicultural-Multiracial Council of Farmington-Farmington Hills.

"We need to find ways to make it unique," said executive board member Bob Heinrich of Metrobank. "The festival is a bit tired."

The goal of bringing Watts-Up into the festival picture is to "bring a level of credibility to the Founders Festival," Flaherty said.

Bringing Farmington Hills, as well as civic organizations into the Farmington-based festival is yet another goal, as well separating the festival from the chamber of commerce, Flaherty continued.

"We also want to create a sense of newness with the festival," she added.

### Marketing talent

One of the pluses of hiring Watts-Up is the couple's marketing abilities and contacts with major corporations and entertainment figures and groups. "We would like to attract visitors from other communities," Flaherty said.

This is considered a transitional year for the festival as the chamber relinquishes control and seeds of change are planted. "The first year we will learn an awful lot," Mike Watts said. "The second year we will be able to implement different things. The third year we will be able to have a major impact."

"We go for longevity," Watts added. "It takes three to five years to get to know an event, develop an event and get people to know the event. The main purpose here is to bring people back into the community and to showcase the community."

The festival executive board

acknowledged that in the future it's probably wise to move the event to a different date because it now competes with major arts events in Wyandotte and Plymouth.

"We have lost a lot of our

crafters," said executive board member Dick Miller of the Masonic Temple.

Other executive board members include: Steve Brock, Farmington Hills city manager, Gerh Cooper, CEO of Bofafof General

Hospital, Judy Downey, executive director of the Farmington Downtown Development Authority, Steve Pope, general manager of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, and Jim Stark, publisher of the Northwest Gazette.

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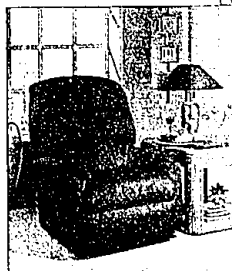
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