

‘Localtopia’ enlivens St. Pete’s downtown Williams Park

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ST. PETERSBURG — It was an unusual scene Saturday in Williams Park.

There were families with children all across its green lawns, sitting around the fountain and beneath shady trees, and laughing and jumping in an inflatable castle.

On the stage, opera singers and belly dancers performed before a mass of people. Many of them drank beer — that wasn’t in a paper bag.

“This is interesting, a different perspective of Williams Park,” said St. Petersburg resident Wendy Bees.

“I’ve never actually been inside the park because I’ve been too afraid to come through here.”

She hopes what happened Saturday will become the norm for this park, known to many as a haunt of drug dealers and a preferred hangout for the city’s homeless people.

Bees and her boyfriend, James Clements, sipped amber-colored India pale ale beers brewed by nearby Green Bench Brewing Co., standing behind a table of neatly-arranged bonsai trees for sale.

The couple was among 100 vendors, all local artisans and entrepreneurs, spread out through the park located in the heart of downtown St. Petersburg, just three blocks from the waterfront between First and Second avenues north.

The space looked every bit as crowded as in the vintage postcard that circulated around town to advertise the event: Williams Park in its heyday, a band filling out the stage beneath the arched shell with an audience seated shoulder to shoulder covering the lawn.

That’s what Keep Saint Petersburg Local head Olga Bof envisioned for Localtopia, a festival celebrating two years for the city’s growing independent business alliance.

The festivities also were meant to create a different image for the historic park than what often is captured in headlines.

About one year ago, police arrested people in a drug sweep here. A couple of months later, the City Council passed an ordinance banning the sale of a synthetic marijuana commonly called spice, which had been rampant in the park.

The character of the park shifts when there is a planned event here. On Saturdays in the summertime, it is populated by food vendors and grocers from the popular downtown market that moves under the trees here to escape the heat of its winter location in Al Lang Stadium's parking lot.

Marty and Mary Lisan say the park could sustain that more inviting, friendly atmosphere, "If they run more events like this (Localtopia)."

"It's a good first start," said Marty Lisan, who lives in the city.

Most of the time, police keep watch at the park, especially around the transit stops where drug deals are common. The park is the busiest bus stop for the Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority with 17 routes.

A stickier issue for the city is the large homeless population that congregates here every day, many of whom aren't causing problems, but add to some peoples' negative perception of the park.

On Saturday, a temporary metal gate surrounded the space on all four sides, with only two entry and exit points.

City Council member Steve Kornell, who was at Localtopia, emphasized everyone is welcome in this public park — except those breaking the law, of course.

"Homeless people are welcome in our city," Kornell said.

"But not anybody who is doing drugs or selling drugs."

In the long-run, it might be the success of all the local merchants and the scores of people who came out to support them that transforms this park.

Lisa Trunzo remembers when both downtown and Williams Park were empty — a "ghost town."

"This really is making my day," said Trunzo, who runs the non-profit Hannah's Homeless.

She admits it's a tricky balance for the park; most of the people she serves were nowhere to be seen among the young families toting babies.

Though it's unlikely the scene on Saturday will be repeated immediately, the park, named for one of the city's founders, again might become what its original planners intended, said Peter Belmont, head of St. Petersburg Preservation.

"This park has seen its ups and downs and it's a great city square," said Belmont.

"I'm sure some day it will become somewhere that people will again enjoy on a regular basis," he said, "and view as in some ways the heart of the city."

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