



Blue Ridge Pride Announces Cancellation of Festival Events

August 31, 2021

To Our Community,

It is with heavy hearts and more than a few tears that our all-volunteer team announces the cancellation of all scheduled Pride events for September. This includes the Blue Ridge Pride Festival, our Welcoming WNC procession, our pageant, senior prom, and other events.

During the past month, we have consulted local health experts, monitored other events, and polled our community. Following, are the reasons for our decision.

Local Health Conditions Are Not Trending as We Had Hoped

This week we asked Buncombe County Health & Human Services (BCHHS) for their latest update. They reported that they are seeing rates of cases similar to what the county saw in late January 2021. They anticipate that a high level of transmission will likely continue for several more weeks.

We pressed: “Is there any chance that the trend could break before September 25?” We had been moving forward, hopeful that we would see a break in COVID trends. They did not foresee any likelihood that it would do so. In fact, they expect it to continue to increase. Meanwhile, they shared that our hospitals are once again nearing capacity limits.

This is clearly a concern to us and our stakeholders.

A Community in Stress

We recently conducted a survey of our festival volunteers, exhibitors, sponsors, procession walkers, healthcare practitioners, and the community at large. Some urged us to keep the festival going: “we really need this!” ... “outdoors can be safe”.

But too many of you expressed deep concern. You have small children, parents, family members and colleagues who are at risk. Many respondents reported having compromised immune systems themselves.

Among those we surveyed, 40% say that, as things stand now, they do not plan to attend any large, outdoor events this month. If risk measures are still rising at festival time, 50% said that they are unlikely to attend our festival. Given that most survey respondents are committed volunteers, exhibitors, and sponsors, this is particularly worrying.

It isn't enough to suggest that people with such concerns simply stay away. We don't produce the festival. Our community does. Volunteers and community service organizations, most of them stretched to their limits right now, feel a lot of pressure to help make this event happen. Is it fair to ask them to weigh their commitment to community against their health?

We Are Not Certain that Our Open, Community-Driven Model Can Assure Public Safety

Most respondents to our survey prefer that we either require masks of everyone (84%) or that we require them if not vaccinated (60%). Eighty-five percent object to a model based on personal choice. A third find a model that encourages masking insufficient.

This poses a problem. Because our festival is held in an open park, we cannot easily mandate or enforce proof of vaccination. We depend on the goodwill of untrained volunteers. We cannot ask them to enforce mandatory measures.

We have looked at pictures of outdoor events around the country. Voluntary measures have a low compliance rate. We had to be honest with ourselves: we cannot promise to meet the standards expressed by most of our stakeholders.

A Pride Festival, Under Current Conditions, Runs Counter to the Event's Core Mission

Our final reason cuts to the heart of our mission. The purpose of the Blue Ridge Pride Festival is to bring a diverse community together for a day of visibility, service, celebration, and dialogue. We pack the park with social justice organizations, community services, corporations, entrepreneurs, artists, faith organizations, employers, health care providers, affinity groups, and government organizations. We invite anyone who comes in good faith to enter a space where all identities are welcome and everyone is celebrated.

The theme of our festival this year is "Inclusion Y'all!" For us, an inclusive festival is one where everyone in the community feels safe and welcome. It would ring hollow to gather for such an event when so many of us feel unsafe or unable to do so. We prefer to wait until "Y'all" can mean everyone.

We wish to emphasize that there were many among those we consulted who want the festival to go forward and who believe that outdoor events can be safe. We are not second-guessing them. Our team went to the wall trying to make this event happen. But eventually, for the reasons outlined above, we had to make a call.

A Special Thank You ... And Next Steps

We want to offer a special thank you to our sponsors, exhibitors, vendors, performers, community partners, and volunteers for your support and trust. We will be reaching out to you this week and next to discuss steps for securing refunds or redirecting your support. Thank you for all that you do to build and serve our community.

Meanwhile, we are already at work with local organizations and leaders on other community-building initiatives. We are particularly excited about our "[Cup of Me](#)" art installation in Pack Square Park. You can visit it in person through September and online starting September 2.



The strips of clothing represent our life experiences – good and traumatic. The teacups represent the stories of hope and resilience that we offer to one another. Visit the tree and our [web page](#). Offer up your special cup of tea to share with our community. Heaven knows, we could certainly use it!

We cannot wait to see each and every one of you in person. In the meantime, be safe; be kind. And make those around you feel the warmth of your welcome.

The Leadership Team at Blue Ridge Pride

Rick, Nancy Sue, Tony, David, Alan, Chris, Ida, Michael, Steven, Colgate, Max, Amanda, Autumn, Butch, Tina