

## FOLK FESTIVAL: Organizational structure revised

*Continued from page 1*

and elsewhere, along with a guitar-building program at Sisters High School.

The organization is currently in the last stages of a capital campaign to buy the building where it is headquartered and which is also the site of the largest festival venue, and is exploring the possibility of building a performing arts venue.

All of that is occurring in the context of a rapidly changing music industry landscape that is putting unprecedented pressures on artists and event producers alike.

The SFF board of directors announced last week that the organization is moving away from a co-directorship that has run the festival for the past five years with Ann Richardson as managing director and Brad Tisdell as creative director. The board announced that it had come to the “conclusion that an executive director (ED) model would better serve our organization, community and mission. While creating an ED position will impact every staff position, it has a material cost and scope overlap with the current managing director position. After a considered decision by the board, SFF has chosen to adopt the ED model and eliminate the managing director position.”

Debbie Newport, a career educator who served on the board in the past and was instrumental in establishing the SFF education programs, will serve as interim executive director.

“We realized quickly that we needed a single voice,” SFF board chair Sue Boettner told *The Nugget*. “The co-director model had been working — with some issues — but we realized that we needed a singular voice... there were different messages because of different styles that were going out to the public and I

think we confused the public sometimes.”

She also noted that the operations of the organization and the jobs of the people within the organization are both growing rapidly in scope and complexity and the board believes that they had to get out in front of the changes.

In an email to friends and business associates, Richardson said, “I am shocked and saddened to let you know that my position as managing director at Sisters Folk Festival has been eliminated and my last day in the office will be March 1. I have been assured that this change is not at all reflective of my performance.” Richardson said that, “I’ll be taking some time to run a few rivers, work on some quilts, walk with my dogs (and husband!), and assess the road ahead.”

Richardson has been working with Newport on the transition.

Boettner told *The Nugget*, “We did look internally for an ED.” However, she said, the board agreed that Richardson and Tisdell each had some of the qualities the organization needs in a future executive, but not all of them.

“We realized quickly that we needed a single voice.”  
— SFF Board Chair  
Sue Boettner

“I think it’s someone who has a passion for the arts and music *and* someone who has the business sense to run a multi-million-dollar organization,” she said. “It’s going to be hard to find the right person, but I think they’re out there.”

Newport noted that the ED must be “somebody that embodies the desired culture in the community.”

The interim director told *The Nugget* that her immediate priorities are supporting

the staff through a transition and in staging the upcoming winter concerts and the My Own Two Hands fundraiser, and delivering on the ongoing school programming.

“We’re all in this together and it’s about creating a healthy community.”  
— Interim Executive  
Director Debbie Newport

Newport noted that many people who attend SFF events don’t know about the extent of the music education programs, which include a Studio to Schools program funded through the Oregon Community Foundation. The program utilizes art not just for its own sake, but as a vehicle for learning critical thinking, creativity, and student leadership as they take on and teach to others.

Newport said that SFF has made a “commitment to sustain all of that going forward. As a community, what we’re doing is supporting education.”

Newport will also lead the search for a full-time ED, whom SFF hopes to have in place in mid-April. The search will be local and nationwide.

Boettner and Newport reflected on the wide impact SFF has on a range of stakeholders, including patrons, vendors, business owners, volunteers, artists, donors, sponsors, the school district and local government.

“It’s mind-boggling how many people we touch,” Boettner said.

And that is at the core of the message Newport most wants to deliver to every stakeholder: “We’re all in this together and it’s about creating a healthy community.”

*Editor’s note: Jim Cornelius was a co-founder of the Sisters Folk Festival and served on its board of directors from 1995 to 2015.*

## SISTERS FOLK FESTIVAL:

# A changing music landscape

The music industry has undergone seismic shifts in the past decade, and those changes are creating challenges both for artists trying to make a living and for event producers like Sisters Folk Festival.

Perhaps the biggest shift is that most artists now must make almost their entire living off of live performance fees. Royalties from record sales and songwriting credits have dwindled. That means that the fees charged by artists’ agents have gone up, and the timing of bookings has changed.

“Some artists are looking way out in advance because artists are playing live to make a living and record sales are no longer the thing that’s sustaining them,” SFF Creative Director Brad Tisdell told *The Nugget*. “I think we need to be looking further in the future for bookings.”

SFF helped to pioneer a thriving music scene in Central Oregon and the Pacific Northwest — and that means there’s more competition for artists both regionally and nationally.

“More and more festivals are coming into the marketplace and larger festivals are coming into the landscape that have big corporate sponsorship and can pay fees that are actually a little out of market rate,” Tisdell said.

Many big festivals have just one or two major stages and book 12 to 16 performers, Tisdell noted. The SFF model places 11 venues throughout Sisters and the festival annually books 40 to 50 artists. Tisdell says SFF remains committed to the model, but it grows increasingly challenging in terms of both budget and logistics to deliver upon.

One of the charms of the Festival is that it’s intimate and that “all the town’s a stage.” Patrons enjoy coming not only to catch artists that they already know, but to find new favorites.

“The niche we’ve created is more of a boutique/‘discovery’ festival,” Tisdell said.

It’s a balance though.

“We do have to have some familiarity with names on the poster,” Tisdell said.

The festival has gained a reputation among artists for the beauty of the setting, the attentiveness of audiences and for being a festival that treats artists exceptionally well. Those are values that Tisdell is committed to, regardless of changes.

He also noted that the timing of SFF is a bit challenging. In addition to being increasingly vulnerable to wild-fire impacts (the 2017 Festival was cancelled due to heavy smoke), it lies just outside the traditional festival “season,” which ends with Labor Day Weekend. If the festival was at an earlier time, it would be easier (and less costly) to catch artists as they route through the Pacific Northwest — but it would also be competing head-to-head with bigger festivals.

Another challenge lies in massive consolidation among booking and management agencies in the music industry. Relationships that took years to build have changed. And negotiations for bookings often come down to a simple business proposition of dollars and cents and timing, leaving some of the less tangible but significant aspects of Sisters and its folk festival unarticulated.

“I wish we could communicate the deep investment that we in the community have in the schools, that artists and agents could understand that it is so much more than a three-day event,” Tisdell said. “I wish we could tell that story better, so that it’s not seen as just another gig.”

Where does Tisdell see SFF in five years?

“My honest answer is, I don’t know,” he said. “We just have to pay attention to the landscape... We need to be realistic and adaptive. We need to look at things in the future through the lens of serving our mission and our community as a nonprofit organization.”

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