



Reefer Festival Madness

Did cannabigotry kill HempFest 2016?

BY BEN RICKER

'POT ACTIVIST IS AN OXYMORON,' JOKES EMERALD EMPIRE HEMPFEST FOUNDER DAN KOOZER

PHOTO: TODD COOPER

The funny thing is, this time last year Emerald Empire HempFest founder Dan “DanK” Koozer was ready to call it quits.

The 71-year-old pot activist launched Eugene’s annual cannabis celebration in 2003. With help from volunteers, Koozer — who hosts the weekly public access talk show *Eugene Cannabis TV* — lines up vendors, books three days of live music and arranges educational lectures. He even sets up a temporary employment agency for folks looking to join the state’s burgeoning cannabis industry.

Putting it all together is a yearlong logistical headache.

For a free, family-friendly ganja-appreciation party wrangled solely by a weathered Deadhead, Emerald Empire HempFest has gone off with very few hitches over the years. Koozer fronts the money for the whole shebang out of his social security checks. Only in the last couple years has HempFest operated in the black.

It’s been a long, strange trip, and Koozer’s had just about enough.

But when city officials threatened last year to deny HempFest its park permits, Koozer felt a renewed sense of purpose take him over.

“I can’t let HempFest go out like that,” Koozer says.

Despite his best efforts, July came and went and Eugene’s midsummer marijuana jamboree never materialized. The city denied Koozer’s application for the use of Maurie Jacobs Parks — HempFest’s home for the last six years — and shut him down again at a public hearing in March.

Koozer tried appealing the city’s ruling in Eugene’s municipal court, to no avail.

“They ran out the clock,” Koozer says. “We never got our day in court.”

The city blames Koozer, saying he screwed up big time last year when he violated the conditions of HempFest’s special park-use permit.

Heads of the park department sat down with Koozer in the weeks following HempFest 2015 to count the ways he’d

run afoul of his agreement with the city. Specifically, former Eugene Parks and Open Spaces Operations Supervisor Richard Zucker grumbled that Koozer failed to post signs around Maurie Jacobs Park indicating that smoking pot at HempFest was strictly forbidden.

According to notes Zucker kept from their meeting, Zucker himself caught a strong whiff of burning reefer in the air on the last day of the celebration. Zucker followed his nose to a vendor’s booth near HempFest’s north entrance belonging to Clackamas-based seed company Stoney Girl Gardens; signs

lic park because it keeps the party accessible to those without cars. Plus, the money he saves not having to rent a private venue keeps costs down, allowing HempFest to remain free.

On a larger level, Koozer finds it highly suspect that city officials suddenly clamped down tighter on his permit access as Oregon’s legal restrictions ease up and marijuana becomes more mainstream.

Koozer appealed the decision in front of city hearings of official Gary Darnielle but lost again.

Koozer says the city violated HempFest’s constitutional

rights and is behaving like heavy-handed “cannabigot” reactionaries who, perhaps for its fringe lefty reputation, reject the freedom culture that surrounds pot.

City of Eugene community relations director Jan Bohman says HempFest’s permit denial had nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that we’re talking about a marijuana-centric good time.

“That’s bullshit,” attorney Brian Michaels says.

Michaels, who represented HempFest pro bono at the March 7 hearing, says that the city held Koozer to an unreasonable standard.

“It’s impossible to expect Dan to keep everyone present obeying the law,” he says. “One-hundred percent crime-free compliance is an impossible standard.”

Try thinking of a world in which the Festival of Eugene or concerts at the Cuthbert were held to the same supreme ideal and shut down after the first hint of pot smoke. “It’s clear to me there’s no consistent lawful basis to refuse [Koozer’s] permit,” Michaels says.

Bohman wouldn’t respond when asked whether or not the city imposes a double standard on HempFest.

Be that as it may, the city won this round and the summer of ’16 floats by without its regularly scheduled HempFest.

But Koozer’s not giving up. If he raises enough money to cover the legal bills, he intends to fight this all the way to the top.

“We are freedom fighters first,” Koozer says, “show promoters second.”

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reading “Smoking Tent” and “15-minute limit” hung outside the flaps.

Koozer denies Zucker’s claim that he knew all along about the informal smoking den.

Both agree, however, that Koozer shut it down immediately after Zucker complained.

Regardless, the damage was done.

“I reminded Dan,” Zucker’s report says, “that by his own admission the smoking of marijuana was not legal on public property and that I would recommend denial of a HempFest permit application for next year because he had violated the terms of his 2015 permit.”

Zucker hoped his warning would give Koozer “ample time to make plans for next year and find an event venue somewhere other than on city of Eugene property.”

For his part, Koozer won’t be turned away. It’s vital to the HempFest ethos, he says, that the festival take place in a pub-