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Confusion over Covid orders kills Orchard Lake Fine Art Show

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The Orchard Lake Fine Art Show was abruptly canceled Thursday, leaving the organizer with a pile of bills -- a casualty of confusion over which of the state's COVID-19 orders applies to an outdoor art fair.

The July 25-26 Orchard Lake show, which last year drew 3,000, had a permit from West Bloomfield Township and was one of the only local art fairs that was still on the calendar. But the Oakland County Health & Human Services Department shut it down just 10 days before the show's start, leaving its organizer Patty Narozny, she says, with over \$20,000 in out-of-pocket costs.

Narozny, whose company Hot Works produces the show, is mostly bitter that Health & Human Services communicated its decision so late in the day -- despite ongoing email correspondence throughout June with department officials on topics related to the event.

The Detroit Social Club Band performs at last year's Orchard Lake Fine Art Show in West Bloomfield. This year's event was cancelled 10 days before its start. (Photo: Hot Works Orchard Lake Fine Art Show)



"Oakland County sat on its a-- till this week," she said, "and I got screwed -- and all the artists and the community. We don't have a gorgeous event to look forward to next week."

The department acted on the basis of Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's Executive Order 2020-110, issued in early June, which clearly limits outdoor gatherings to no more than 100 people.

Oakland County spokesman Bill Mullan says that Narozny's June correspondence was with the section of Health & Human Services that oversees food safety at fairs, but not with the Health Division, which is where the decision to cancel was eventually made.

"The Health Division only found out the fair was going on was when banners went up in the past week or so," he said. Narozny also seems to have been the victim of inaccurate information.

She says that West Bloomfield officials had earlier suggested her fair might fall under Executive Order 2020-115, which permits larger outdoor crowds up to 250. But that order was limited to counties up north, and doesn't apply in Oakland County.

West Bloomfield Supervisor Steven Kaplan, who insists he wasn't "the Grinch who stole Christmas," is disappointed, too.

"Frankly, this fair is one of the highlights of the year for us in West Bloomfield," he said. "The township receives fabulous feedback from it."

But there's still the question why Narozny was led to believe that the less-restrictive order might apply to her. "Did somebody here say 250?" Kaplan asked. "Perhaps. But that's not the issue. She couldn't even do 250," he said, noting that with 88 artists, plus food vendors and other booths, she'd be well over halfway to the limit before any patrons walked in.

"I think when Patty tells you that, she's correct," he added. "But it's not like it was a binding contract. It was more a comment in passing. And it's the proprietor's responsibility to know the law."

Narozny got an email from the Health Department Tuesday, which noted her COVID safety proposals as presented could not satisfy Order 110.

So Narozny's team stayed up all night rejiggering their safety plans -- now planning 6 feet between booths, and organizing the fair's layout so there would be four self-contained sections with no more than 100 people in each at any given time.

"I bought 700 face coverings and made them required," she said. "I bought hand sanitizer for every booth and suggested to artists they use pointers, and police the number of people in their booths. I hired security to work the gates to control the crowd."

None of it did any good - the Health Department told West Bloomfield they were nixing the fair the next day. As far as they were concerned, the show was one event, no matter how Narozny tried to divide it up, and the limit was 100 people.

She resents what she sees as arbitrary distinctions drawn between different activities, as she starts the process of refunding about \$45,000 to artists and sponsors.

"They allow Dixieland Flea Market to open, which was jam-packed inside and out," she said. "Great Lakes Crossing is open. Meijer's is jammed."

Narozny feels like other businesses got due consideration, but that art fairs were disregarded by the state.

"They shut down this industry," she said. "These artists need to get back to work. This was the first show many of them would have done in months," Narozny added. "I guess art just isn't essential."

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