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Still in debt, Gator Stompin' pushes on with 'contained' budget

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The debt owed to restaurants, bars, contractors and others following last year's Gator Stompin' event has been chopped to roughly half — or about \$65,000 from an amount that once approached \$150,000.

But the head organizer said Gainesville's 32-year-old annual pub crawl will go on and will still be a crowd pleaser, albeit on a more "contained" budget.

"I still have quite a bit of debt accrued from last year, so I don't expect (any businesses to participate) without paying them from last year and probably paying them in advance for this year," said Jason Bowman, who bought the event in 2005 and has merged it with his nonprofit, the Pledge 5 Foundation.

Pre-sale tickets for Gator Stompin' 2015 went on sale in December, and Bowman said that money is going toward having the debts paid off hopefully by the April 30 event.

"I really believe we'll make everything right before the event happens this year," he said.

Bowman said Pledge 5 — which encourages volunteerism through discounts to events in return for a pledge of five hours of community service — will shy away from Gator Stompin' being as big of a financial source for the nonprofit. It will instead rely more on its businesses as they go through changes.

First, it closed its Thrift 5 thrift store on Main Street and will close its University Avenue location by the end of the month and move into the former Big Lots location, which is in the same shopping center as Thrift 5's former location at 2340 N. Main St.

The California-based landlord is charging only for 5,000 of the 34,000 square feet for the first six months and will increase the rent every six months until reaching the amount that covers the full square footage, Bowman said.

"In their eyes, they're looking at a donation initially with a guaranteed renter because the space had been sitting (vacant) for about three or four years," he said.



Matt Stamey/The Gainesville Sun

In this April 28, 2011 file photo, a Santa Fe College student attempts to throw a ping pong ball into a cup at Spin Cycle during Gator Stompin' 2011.

Second, Pledge 5 just launched a car dealership, Community Overdrive, at 16th Avenue and North Main Street that allows buyers to pay for up to 25 percent of the car through volunteering. Pledge 5 partnered with Carzilla to pilot test the program with 25 cars and made sure it's sustainable, Bowman said.

Billed as a "rite of passage" for Gainesville's college crowd, Gator Stompin' sells tickets in the form of T-shirts that provide entry into participating businesses and scheduled music performances.

Tickets also come with tokens redeemable for beer, pizza or other items offered by the businesses, which turn them back in to Pledge 5 to receive payment.

Over the five years prior to 2014, Bowman said the event had seen booming growth, so he was willing to invest a bit more. The \$50,000 specifically for music in 2014 paid for performances by Grammy-nominated DJ Wolfgang Gartner and Atlanta rapper Waka Flocka Flame at the Bo Diddley Community Plaza downtown.

Other expenses included promotion, police, live-sound production, portable toilets, fencing and hiring additional staff through Pledge 5.

But financial problems started a few months before the May 2014 event, when Pledge 5's two Thrift 5 thrift stores saw seasonal drops from students buying for their new apartments and houses in the summer and fall but not as much thereafter.

To make matters worse, Gator Stompin' was about 2,000 attendees short of expectations, even though it did break its own attendance record with nearly 7,000 people.

The financial fallout included complaints of unpaid wages for employees and at least one small-claims lawsuit from a downtown business, The Midnight Cafe.

Most recently, Orlando-based PTE Productions, which set up the sound for Gartner and Waka Flocka Flame, was awarded a \$39,700 judgment on Feb. 2 against Bowman and Pledge 5, according to Alachua County court records. That includes attorney fees, court costs and interest.

Bowman said, though, the final amount settled with PTE was actually less than \$10,000.

"If we did (have to pay the full \$39,700), then that \$65,000 number would be a lot higher," he said of the total debt owed.

To avoid any money missteps this year, Bowman has brought in a steering committee comprising the owners of five Gainesville businesses: Sweet Mel's, Vellos, Tall Paul's, 101 Management Group and Lillian's.

Melinda Crawford, owner of Sweet Mel's, called 2014 a "fluke" and "a learning experience," and she emphasized the pub crawl is "a last hurrah for a lot of Gators" who might be graduating.

"We are trying very hard to stay within the parameters that we know we will be comfortable with, that everyone will get paid, and that the kids will have a great time," she said.

Total participating businesses are expected to drop from last year's 80, but about 20 have signed on so far, including Sweet Mel's.

“After last year, a lot of people said, 'Oh, you're not going to do this this year,' and I said, 'Oh yes I am,’” Crawford said. “If you're going into Gator Stompin' to make big bucks, then I'm sorry for you. To me, that's not what it's all about.”

Music performers and venues are still being decided, Bowman said, adding he's working with Gainesville-based Swamp Records on finding someone local.

“There are some people that are very upset still,” he said of Gator Stompin' 2014, “but we've been able to keep our doors open. We're being given the chance to make things right and pay everyone back.”

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