

# 40th annual Harborfest planning under way

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- Jan 29, 2016



With the 40th anniversary of Harborfest on the horizon, organizers want residents of Hampton Roads and beyond to lend a hand in shaping the annual free public maritime festival.

Harborfest 2016 is set for June 10 to 12 and will feature land and sea activities, including tall ships, artisan food and nationally recognized entertainment. Organizers also are taking cues from the festival's early days to shape this year's event.

This year's Harborfest will include a regatta that will be an around-the-buoys day race that will start at Craney Island and finish at Town Point Park and Waterside in Norfolk.

In a recent announcement, Festevents said the race, which mirrors sailboat races from the festival's early days in the late 1970s and early '80s, is sanctioned by the U.S. Sailing Association and the Norfolk Yacht and Country Club.

"I think one of the most amazing things about Harborfest was, it was a festival initially, entirely put on by volunteers," said Bruce Bishop, an attorney with Willcox and Savage. He served as chairman of Harborfest in 1978, 1979 and 1980. "There was no paid staff whatsoever. I think it really is the spark that led to the rejuvenation of the waterfront and ultimately downtown."

Organizers from the festival's early days and recent days gathered in Norfolk on Jan. 20 to share memories and jumpstart the process of producing the upcoming event.

"When I came back to Norfolk from law school in 1976," Bishop said, "literally you could roll a bowling ball down Granby Street or Main Street after 5 p.m. It really was a ghost town." And back then, he added, events were being held on a waterfront that looked nothing like the polished, developed area that people are accustomed to seeing today.

His brother, Barry Bishop, executive vice president of the Greater Norfolk Corp., also was involved in the early days. He described the waterfront back then as "pretty rough." But nevertheless, he said, people came and enjoyed themselves.

Word spread, and what had started as a one-off festival to mark America's 1976 bicentennial took hold. A few years later, Harborfest birthed the Festevents organization.

"If there hadn't been a Harborfest, I don't think there would have been a Jim Rouse," Barry Bishop said, referring to the late developer of Waterside. A redevelopment of that property is under way.

“I think one of the things that excites me the most as a board member is how much the region came together to come to Harborfest,” Shurl Montgomery said. “We had people from every city come here to enjoy the waterfront, and that was really unique.”

Montgomery added that the involvement and support of city council, the private business sector, the Navy and the port all came together to elevate Harborfest into a world-class event. Montgomery also said Harborfest was the spark that reshaped downtown Norfolk.

“There was no neighborhood down here 40 years ago. There is a neighborhood there now,” he said. “It’s really grown from what I would call a gravel parking lot to a multimillion-dollar waterfront.”

On the 40th anniversary, Montgomery said a point of satisfaction would be to have people who haven’t visited Harborfest in years pay a return visit in 2016. In 2009 and 2010, Montgomery served as the president of Festevents, and he also has served on the organization’s board for more than 20 years. He most recently was CEO of the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority.

“I would hope that as we roll out this 40th anniversary, the biggest payoff for me would be for folks that haven’t been here for a long time, that say ‘I was there in 1983 or 1990 and I haven’t been back’ would be to get them to come back and look at Harborfest now,” Montgomery said.

In addition to memories, Festevents is asking people for feedback on how Harborfest has affected them personally; suggestions on 40th anniversary companies or groups that might want an opportunity to have an event or promotion tied to the upcoming event; and ideas on how to commemorate and celebrate Harborfest’s 40th anniversary.

“Forty years of the region’s largest festival represents more experiences, memories and stories that would inspire ideas than I and my staff could ever begin to think of on our own,” Festevents CEO Karen Scherberger said.

“So having this gathering tonight with people representing all 40 years, all points of the community, and that’s not just Norfolk but the region, from volunteers to police officers, it’s their stories, their memories and their ideas on how to commemorate this milestone that’s going to make the task of shaping this up possible.”

The public is encouraged to submit comments, suggestions and memories to [norfolkharborfest40@festevents.org](mailto:norfolkharborfest40@festevents.org) or by mail to Karen Scherberger, Norfolk Harborfest 40, 120 W. Main St., Norfolk, VA 23510.