



Is the Gasparilla Parade . . .

for the people, by the people, of the people?

What is Gasparilla day? A beautiful opportunity to close the streets and have a pedestrian experience, something quite unusual in the suburban world we inhabit. Transforming Bayshore Boulevard, "the street of dreams," from a quasi-interstate highway without trucks and a slightly lower speed limit into a boulevard where people, bicycles, and dogs can meander, wander or stagger down the thoroughfare is invigorating. Notwithstanding the inconveniences of the corporate enclaves, comfortably housed in tents where "they" lounge in luxury, relaxing without the inconvenience of actually having to be in a public space. Here, "they" can grab all the plastic beads they can carry. There is tasty catered food, and security guards block the entrance unless you have the proper ID badge. Corporate upper-level management can enjoy the parade with their families without a sweaty crowd pressing against them, wrestling for souvenir junk beads.

Currently, the "average" citizen is restricted to compressed areas between the corporate domains that dominate the boulevard from Rome Avenue to Howard Avenue. People are pressed against the corporate fences that block them from getting a decent view of the parade and/or being near enough to catch the plastic booty. I suppose we should considerate ourselves fortunate that there

are still available a few democratic spots along the parade route at all—regardless of race, creed or national origin—people can join together to beg for trinkets from an embarrassingly boring parade that has maintained a rigid format since 1926.

The Gasparilla parade has evolved into a big business for the city, which sells seating, concession permits, and corporate land grants plus charges the organizations to present their modest floats. From all appearances the revenue generated from this extravaganza is substantial but, unfortunately, expenses include a very comprehensive security system with vast numbers of well-armed local, county, and state police. I think there might be as many security personnel (approx. 2000) as there are vendors.

Of course, the vendors pay the city to sell their goods while the security forces get overtime salary for their efforts. One interesting security officer I spoke with was an independent contractor who was guarding a modest residence on Bayshore from any trespassers. He was certainly well-armed for the task: a Taser gun, a 45 semi-automatic pistol, a 38 revolver for emergency; what appeared to be three hand grenades but were, in fact, three



additional magazines for his 45 semi-automatic were attached to his belt. I think he was better equipped to hold his own against a brigade of ISIS rebels rather than a brigade of make-believe pirates. He also had on a bulletproof vest for his safety, perhaps to protect him from all of his own hardware, plus a Polk County Sheriff uniform.

However, the highlight of the security service personnel were the K-9 units that had a more pressing job: sniffing each float that pulled up to the queue line at 9 a.m. The dogs appeared genuinely happy to execute their duties of sniffing out explosives. I wonder how they train them to smell all the various chemicals that could be concocted to create a bomb. However, I was glad to see them doing their job as best as they could.

During the parade, I noticed that about half of the audience was not paying any attention to the tedious parade but, instead, enjoying a long block party. Actually, one enthusiastic reveler I overheard said, "I wish they had Gasparilla once a month," and his energetic, drunken teenager friend said, "How about once a week?"

I would like to suggest that some of the money that the city takes in should be applied to improving the quality of the parade, providing funding to groups that can contribute some creative entertainment value, even open it to citizens' groups that bring imaginative activities to the event—not just how many strings of beads they can toss. A sterling example of this occurred in the early days of the Guavaween Parade in Ybor City (circa 1980's). There were politically creative groups parading imaginative ideas that were richly entertaining at very low costs. (A volunteer parade, what a concept!)

If something isn't done to improve the quality of this parade, it might follow the path of another example of an underfunded entertainment spectacle that is going out of business: The Barnum and Bailey Ringling Brothers circus. They are trying to blame the closure of the circus on the loss of the elephant act, but that is a

disingenuous argument, as their attendance numbers have been going down for the last few years regardless of the elephants.

However, there is a correlation between cutting costs by reducing the number of acts and a resulting loss of audience numbers. They have continued to reduce spending on the show each year for many years now. From a magnificent three-ring circus, that originated to give more people better seats to see the show up close, it has devolved to today's shallow version. I am referring to the recent show at the Amelia Arena, where I witnessed the "extravaganza"; the same venue in which the three-ring show was hosted for many years now presented a one-ring show. We are paying to see "The Greatest Show on Earth," but we are getting a modest one-ring circus. It was excellent, but not the *greatest* show on earth. This bait and switch strategy of selling tickets based on the reputation of what was once an awe-inspiring show for the reduced show of today while charging the same ticket price could not last forever. No wonder attendance has gone down; this one-ring circus leaves many of the spectators too far away to enjoy the performance.

"The Greatest Show on Earth" is looking a little vacuous, I am sorry to report. The performers are highly polished and hard working, but there are just not enough acts to cover the entire performance venue. Cutting cost usually results in a loss of customers. Sure "tastes" change, but that excuse doesn't hold up if you look at the wildly successful *Cirque du Soleil*.

Unfortunately, both the circus and the parade have managed to arrive at the same level of disinterested spectators by not thinking innovatively. To do that they must be willing financially to support new creative ideas. For the parade, just increasing the number of similar floats where costume shop dressed pirates toss out plastic beads does not make a better parade. For starters, check out parades for *Carnival* in Brazil or Caribbean countries to see fantastic floats. In these countries, the cities actually provide financing to fund different groups that present something creative, bold and different for the parade. In Rio di Janeiro and Salvador, Brazil, Trinidad, or other Caribbean countries, the focus is on choreography, costumes, music or all of the above. Parades in these countries are extravagant shows on wheels that pass the stationary crowds who gasp at each new spectacle that seems to outdo the previous one. Not exactly the same old floats tossing out beads each year.

The City of Tampa underwrites different types of tourist "development projects" and might consider funding creative approaches to the parade. With this effort the city could achieve two worthy goals: support community arts groups who can revitalize and breathe some life into a dying dinosaur of a parade and make the parade the centerpiece of the day—not just an excuse to party.

Reported by Bayshore Bob, a Hyde Park resident
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