

# The Virginian-Pilot

## Next stop for bus group: Olde Towne music festival

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The American Bus Association's Top 100 Events touts festivals celebrating roses and rodeos, Shakespeare and shellfish.

In Portsmouth's case, it's the Olde Towne Holiday Music Festival.

The city's signature holiday festival, along with Virginia Beach's Boardwalk Art Show and Festival, are two of the three Virginia events that made this year's recently revealed list.

The Oceanfront, of course, has never lacked for tourists.

For Portsmouth, however, a spot on the association's roster of recommendations is a sign the city is busy flagging down bus travelers once again.

That's good news to downtown retailers who were unhappy when the city scaled back efforts to court motor coach travelers several years ago.

Lynne Lochen put the brakes on that decision two years ago when she became director of Portsmouth's Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The emphasis had been on convention business to fill hotels rather than working toward "well-rounded tourism," Lochen said. But part of the tourism staff's job is to put visitors on High Street, and sometimes conventioners don't even leave their hotel, she said.

On the other hand, bus drivers "literally open the doors" on the downtown corridor, delivering 45 people at a time to restaurants, shops and museums, she said.

Just one bus on a day trip leaves an estimated \$2,500 to \$5,000 in local cash registers, according to the Travel Industry Association, Lochen said. If the bus group stays overnight, the numbers double, she said.

"We think that's a viable business," she said.

So does Ken Woolard, co-owner of Way Back Yonder Antiques.

"Anytime you inject a number of extra people into the daily mix, it helps," he said. "And people who come on buses tend to spend more."

He remembers well the time a sorority arrived downtown on a motor coach tour. They spent \$800 in his shop in about an hour.

Woolard, who also serves on the board of the Olde Towne Business Association, said members look forward to seeing more buses at the annual holiday festival, too.

Started in 1998 by the city's tourism director, the event brings hundreds of musicians and singers together to perform holiday music along the streets of Olde Towne and in the district's historic churches.

There are bonfires on street corners, sidewalk vendors hawking hot chocolate and apple cider, and a cast of actors dressed in Victorian clothes.

This year's event will be Dec. 8.

The Convention and Visitors Bureau went after the Top 100 event designation because it felt the holiday festival was the kind of "fresh and new" event the association seeks, Lochen said.

Eron Shosteck, the association's senior vice president for communications, said judges look for events that offer a lot "in terms of entertainment value and something that's out of the ordinary."

In conjunction with the Top 100, the association comes out with a smaller number of "perennial favorites" called Internationally Known Events.

This year, Virginia International Tattoo in Norfolk was added to that list, he said.

For now, Lochen said, she's happy with a place on the Top 100. Being on the list "will heighten awareness of Portsmouth as a destination," she said.

"This list is highly touted and very much awaited," she said.