

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Wilmington Riverfest Cancels 2026 Festival Board Prioritizes Attendee Safety and Vendor Experience

*Annual event will return October 2027 with improved venue;
sponsors and vendors encouraged to commit to reimagined festival*



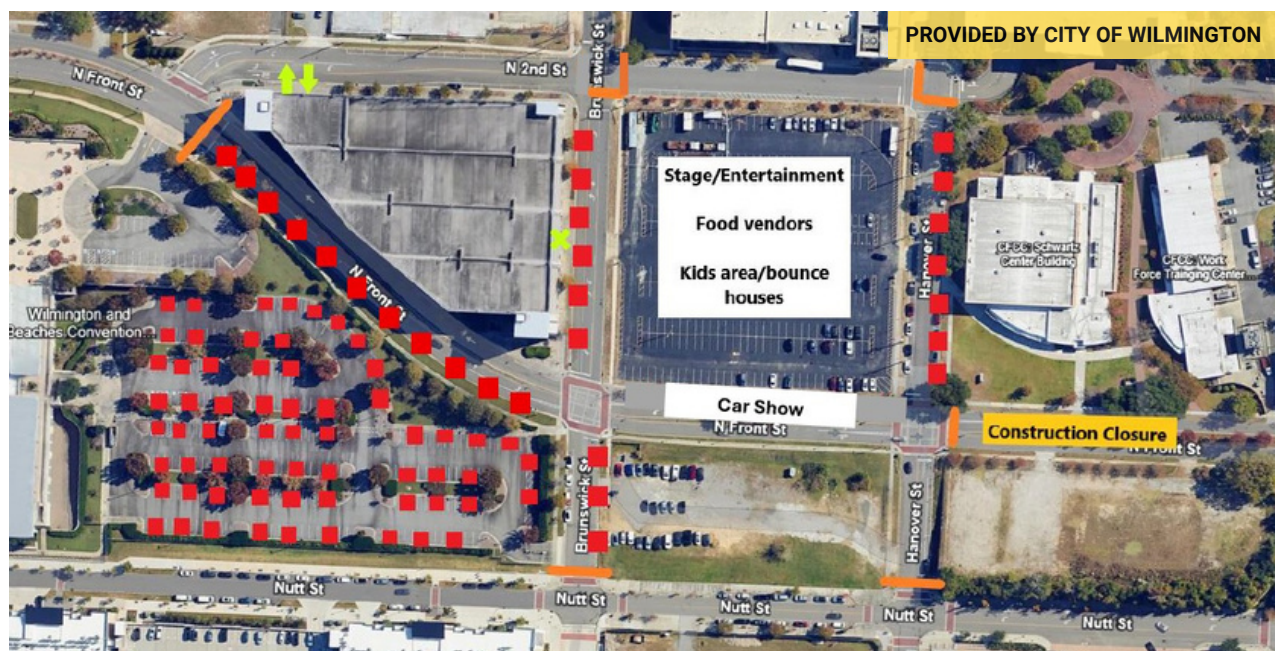
WILMINGTON, N.C.—Wilmington Riverfest's Board of Directors unanimously voted this week to cancel the 2026 festival due to untenable venue logistics and public safety constraints imposed by recent municipal decisions. Rather than compromise operational integrity, the Board is redirecting resources to a 2027 return that meets its established standards for vendor and attendee experience.

"This is not a step backward—it is a strategic pivot that honors both our community and our vendors," said Roderick Bell, Wilmington Riverfest [WRF] Board President. "We are returning in 2027 with a festival that exceeds expectations, rather than compromise the quality and safety our stakeholders deserve."

Proposed Layouts Did Not Meet Basic Standards

Since April 2026, Riverfest's Board has engaged the city in good faith to address its decision to relocate the festival from Front Street. The proposed layout at Brunswick and Nutt Streets presents insurmountable operational and safety barriers:

- **Vendor access compromised:** Limited entry points cannot accommodate standard delivery vehicles, forcing vendors into rejected conditions.
- **Uncoordinated competing events:** The Wilmington Convention Center's concurrent Home Show and The Wilson Center's four-day production create traffic and safety conflicts the city has not adequately addressed.
- **Public safety risk:** Keeping major intersections open during a festival of Riverfest's scale creates unacceptable gridlock that violates sound event management.





WRF has submitted multiple alternative layouts without a suitable resolution. Though the city retroactively approved the most limited of the Board's alternate layouts on August 31, the date was too late for festival planning purposes. Attempting to move forward with the layout at this time is not feasible and the event remains operationally hindered.

Safety Over Expedience

The decision to cancel the 2026 event affirms Wilmington Riverfest's 47-year commitment to attendee and vendor experience, operational integrity, and community responsibility—signaling that this organization will not compromise its standards.

For Vendors, Sponsors, and Community Partners:

Full refunds will be issued for 2026 commitments without exception. In addition:

- Priority 2027 booking and enhanced terms await those who remain committed.
- Quarterly updates on venue negotiations will be shared with all stakeholders.
- Community input is critical: The city must hear that Riverfest is essential to Wilmington. Vendors, sponsors, and residents are urged to communicate directly with city leadership about viable 2027 venue requirements.

The Path Forward: 2027 and Beyond

The Board will use 2026–2027 to work with city and regional stakeholders on a sustainable 2027 venue that supports vendor viability and community benefit. For effective festival planning, WRF believes a suitable venue layout must be determined by July 1, 2027 at the latest.

"The board and committee leadership remains hopeful about coming to a collaborative resolution with the City of Wilmington," Bell said. "I believe we share the same goal, which is a 2027 Riverfest celebration that represents the very best of Wilmington and the Cape Fear region."

About Wilmington Riverfest

Wilmington Riverfest [WRF] is a registered nonprofit organization celebrating downtown Wilmington and the Cape Fear region since 1979. For nearly 47 years, volunteer leadership has organized this beloved event, held the first full weekend in October. The free, family-friendly street fair features music, food, entertainment, and local business participation, delivering sustained annual economic benefit to the region. WRF remains committed to serving as a cornerstone event in North Carolina's fall festival landscape.

For sponsorship, vendor participation, or media inquiries, please contact:

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