

Red River North Tourism host AGM and Tourism Expo at Memorial Hall

Shirley Muir and Mervyn Gunter address residents

By Katelyn Boulanger

Red River North Tourism (RRNT) hosted its annual general meeting last week at Memorial Hall in Selkirk. The not-for-profit organization that aims to maximize tourism in St. Andrews, Selkirk, and St. Clements also invited Shirley Muir, founder of Holiday Alley, to make a presentation and Mervyn Gunter, acting board member of the Tourism Industry Association of Manitoba (TIAM), to take on the keynote speech.

The Tourism Expo started off the event. RRNT had a variety of booths fill Memorial Hall from 4 p.m. until the sit-down portion of the meeting started at 7 p.m. There were artists, local groups, and representatives from local attractions and festivals.

RRNT president Lois Wales welcomed residents to the event and then brought Muir to the stage who let everyone know a little bit more about Holiday Alley.

"[She'll] offer us a glimpse into how the festival has grown and remained exciting over the past six years. Through changeable weather, construction schedules and global health challenges, this festival regularly makes national news. It has reached out to embrace international audiences and participants, remember the twelve-day sing-along, and now explores sculptural media. It's so much more than sheep," said Wales.

Muir started her presentation by talking about the beginnings of Holiday Alley.

"Holiday Alley does have a focus. It's about light, and art, and sound, and creativity, and culture. And, it has some goals. The goals are to be a tourism magnet, do some downtown revitalization, create a place for the community to connect, and support some local non-profits. Every year we check against that to make sure that the things we're doing still are true to those goals and the kind of vision that we have," she said.

Muir explained that one of the major ideas behind Holiday Alley is that it's a festival owned by the community.

"If you have an idea, you want to do something, and it's connected with arts and culture and creativity and life. If you bring it, we'll promote it, we'll market it and we'll find a space and we'll find volunteers to make it happen for you. But you've

got to bring it," she said.

Last year's Ribbon Skirt Fashion Show, Outdoor Movie, Tipi Village: Gidoojijaakominaan Onjii Dibaa Jimowinan, Choral Concert, Pop-up Art Gallery, and Adult Crafternoon were all ideas brought forth by the community.

Possibly the most exciting and definitely most recent part of Holiday Alley is the inclusion of the Straw Sculpture Symposium and Fire on the Red which was also an idea brought to our community.

"I was invited to speak at the [2023 International Winter Cities Conference] sponsored by Travel Manitoba and I talked for 90 minutes about ten things that we've learned about how to make a great festival. People were at this conference from all over Canada. As I often do at these conferences, I'll get up and ask a question or pose a problem," said Muir.

Muir chose that fateful time to ask the crowd what we should do about adding sculptural media to Holiday Alley. Because Holiday Alley is in November, it's often a bit early for snow sculptures but too cold for sand sculptures.

On that day, representatives from Sputnik Architecture and Anvil Tree came to her and suggested straw sculptures and the idea for the Straw Sculpture Symposium was born.

In addition to giving the community the ability to shape the festival, Muir talked about how they've kept track of what they are doing to make sure that aligns with their goals and that they are going in the right direction every year.

In Holiday Alley's annual Community Report Card they reported that 58% of festival attendees are from outside of Selkirk and 30% are from outside of Red River North. They saw that sales for downtown businesses went up and perhaps most importantly for our community be-



RECORD PHOTO BY KATELYN BOULANGER

Red River North Tourism hosted its annual AGM and Tourism Expo last week.

tween Holiday Alley and the event that started it all Homes for the Holidays, \$160,000 has been donated to local non-profits.

Muir then spoke about the honour of being named Event of the Year by Travel Manitoba. It was a significant milestone for a festival that's been around for less than a decade.

One comment that Muir shared from an attendee really sums up how far this festival has come.

"This young woman said, 'My friends and I no

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longer say, 'Do you want to go to Holiday Alley?' What do you think they say? They say, 'What time should we meet at Holiday Alley?' That's a significant switch," said Muir.

She then reminded everyone of the Brainstorming Session that Holiday Alley will be hosting on April 6 and encouraged residents to register at holidayalley.ca/register.

It was a tough act to follow but Merv Gunter did just that. As acting board member of the newly created Tourism Industry Association of Manitoba, he explained what the group was all about and why it's important to have industry advocates like them as part of the tourism conversation.

Gunter started out by explaining that there has been a need for a group like this for 20 years. There have been other groups that have taken on this responsibility throughout that time including the Manitoba Chamber of Commerce but he said that an specific industry-led, advocacy voice for operators was needed.

To explain why this is so important Gunter turned to his advocacy work in the past. In the past, he was part of a group of seven people who came together to lobby the Manitoba government of the day to invest more in Travel Manitoba. The government listened and Travel Manitoba was able to do more with the increased funds.

"We are [now] one of the best-marketed provinces across the country," explained Gunter.

He then went on to explain what they aimed to do when the idea for an industry tourism group came to-

gether in 2020. With tourism being a cornerstone of the economy of Manitoba, TIAM's mandate is to work with industry leaders to foster a competitive and prosperous visitor economy.

After studies suggested that having a unified voice for the industry would be beneficial, they surveyed members regarding advocacy priorities. Prior to the previous provincial election, TIAM advocated for addressing the labour shortage, recognizing the industry's value with the appointment of a Minister of Tourism and strengthening Travel Manitoba's sustainable funding model.

Gunter then discussed the future of TIAM. Currently, the group of founding members is aiming to advocate for the industry, work alongside the current provincial government and new Minister of Tourism, and develop partnerships with other tourism groups.

The next big milestone for the group will be their first TIAM Conference and AGM which will take place in the RBC Convention Centre on April 17. To learn more about this event or if you are interested in becoming a founding member check out their website at <https://tiamanitoba.ca/>. Founding memberships are only available until March 31.

The meeting ended with the RRNT's AGM which saw new members joining the board: Diane Cole and Holly Typliski. Anabelle Busch also joined as the youth representative and Jim Pelletier will be taking on the role of treasurer.



RECORD PHOTOS BY KATELYN BOULANGER

Residents were treated to a presentation on Holiday Alley by Shirley Muir (above) and a keynote speech by Merv Gunter about the Tourism Industry Association of Manitoba (left).

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