

The Valdosta Daily Times

OUR OPINION:

International fair needs support

April 14, 2008

— What most see of the Azalea International Folk Fair is a one-day event in March, which includes a folk dance competition, some great food from around the country and a lot of activities for the family to enjoy, bringing cultures of the world into the heart of Valdosta. What most don't see are the thousands of school children, who are given the opportunity to expand their understanding and appreciation of other cultures and the hundreds of volunteers and volunteer hours for the 12 months leading up to the annual event, which has been recognized as Georgia's official international fair.

The people who work diligently each year to ensure the success and continued growth of this event do so because they have a heart for bringing culture and diversity to those around them. They have a passion for what they do and their work is a pure labor of love. But passion and a desire to continue such a good work can only take a project so far. What is desperately needed now is funding.

Since it began, the Azalea International Folk Fair has relied on revenue from the cost of admissions to the one-day regional fair, the school field trips, foundation and corporate sponsorship and state grants. Those grants are offered for a set amount of years, after which the receiving organization must wait two or three years before reapplying for assistance. That time has come. This year, inclement weather caused more than 650 students to back out of a planned field trip, which had already been paid for by the Azalea International Folk Fair, with no way of recouping those funds. Adding to this revenue shortfall plus the decrease in grant assistance, the fair has nowhere else to turn but the local government.

The event brings thousands of visitors to Valdosta and Lowndes County and organizers have already invested thousands of dollars out of their own pockets. In order to continue the annual event, the Azalea International Folk Fair board of directors requested that the Valdosta City Council consider a \$5,000 donation to offset the cost of renting the James H. Rainwater Conference Center for the three days of the event. This support would balance the fair's 2009 budget.

Whether the council, the Valdosta-Lowndes County Conference Center and Tourism Authority, which has already provided a discounted rate on the Conference Center

rental fee, or some other entity decides to support this event, someone needs to step in to ensure the continuation of this event. It is too important to this community, this state and this region to simply let it slip away.

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