

After Fatal Shooting, First Friday is at a Crossroads

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After last month's shooting during First Friday in the Crossroads, the local Crossroads Community Association (CCA) has made changes to this month's festivities, albeit only temporarily.

These changes respond to the August 2nd shooting death of Erin Langhofer who was struck by a stray bullet while waiting near a food truck at 18th and Main Streets. A suspect has been arrested in connection with the shooting.

In an email exchange with Julie Johnson, Board Liaison of the CCA, tells Informality, "No permits will be issued within the current festival boundaries." (This area approximately comprises 17th and 19th Streets north to south, Cherry to Wyandotte Streets east to west, and also includes stretches of Baltimore Avenue) "Licensed food trucks and art vendors will be allowed outside of the boundaries in accordance with city law."

Johnson says there will be a monitoring of "event, security and trash pickup" and, "as with every First Friday, the Crossroads works with the city keeping them abreast of all efforts. Safety measures include the monitoring of the event along with the assistance of off-duty KCPD officers." With such large crowds and liability concerns everywhere, law enforcement and insurance issues dominate the monthly event that has been occurring for two decades.

For the last few years, the Crossroads Arts District has grown in the number of visitors to a point where the original intent of looking at art locally and globally has taken on the look of a 70%-off Super Sale. Hordes of people smashing and mashing one another, whose purpose, it seems, is to wait on one food truck line before heading to the next table of handmade earrings, completely ignoring, or ignorant of, the art galleries displaying the work that civic leaders always turn to when discussing how important the neighborhood is to tourism. Perhaps the neighborhood should be renamed the *Crossroads Commercial District*. Food trucks given permits in abundance, have been a dominant presence throughout the neighborhood, attracting hundreds to the area. The trucks' generators, especially, contribute to the noise pollution, before the CCA relegated almost all the trucks to an area close by the former Kansas City Star building. It has instead created a concentrated cacophony of cables and signage, with lines of people waiting to purchase food, causing plenty of trash, adding congestion and safety issues.



A random shot of the food trucks that have come to typify the First Friday experience

Throughout the Crossroads, art vendors set up to sell their wares, in effect competing with the art and artists inside the galleries. While the majority sought and received permits, it manages to increase the abundance of traffic, making it difficult to maneuver in and around the galleries that exist throughout the Crossroads. Musicians set up on street corners, unsure if they have been issued permits, add to the cacophony. One could see visitors clamping their hands over their ears as they approached certain corners. The neighborhood has taken on the look and feel of Mardi Gras; crowded, confusing and distilled to an idea of art and culture, but in truth offering only tin-plated commerce that might look interesting in civic profile pictures but the reality is somewhat different. It is why some of these galleries don't even bother opening their doors on First Fridays. Openings for new artists over the past couple years have been occurring on other days of the week and by invitation too.

This month will see an opportunity to returning First Friday in the Crossroads to its original intent; a cultural experience that is not crowded out by an enormity of street artists and vendors. These groups have ample opportunities throughout the year to present and promote their work with Kansas City's thriving art fair and makers community that does not get in the way of this neighborhood's street level galleries.

The City of Kansas City has made it its mission to bring in development and commercial enterprise to the city over the past few years. And for as successful as this endeavor has been, the Crossroads Arts District's cultural largess is not license to overburden the neighborhood of its existing gallery life, careful to not push out the artists that ignite such cultural activity in the first place.



A typical First Friday crowd as it has become in recent years

Three local galleries spoke with Informality, either via email exchange or through Instagram DM, to present their take on how last month's tragedy will play out in the months to come.

Emily Eddins, Gallery Associate at Haw Contemporary Art, with a location in the Crossroads, says, "We have a wait and see attitude. It has been a circus atmosphere for years...traffic, cruising, and parking have become so bad. We close on First Fridays at 6 PM."

As mentioned above, ceding to the crowds and noise, not opening at all on First Friday has been an issue with these neighborhood galleries for some time.

Another Crossroads gallery, Weinberger Fine Art, owner Kim Weinberger tells Informality, "As far as we understand, it is only for this month until they regain their insurance. We are eager to see how the changes affect the atmosphere of the night."

"Yes, I think we would like to see it stay this way or at least have more attention put into making the night more about the art. We think there should be higher fees for the food trucks and tabletop vendors to feed back into the Crossroads Association to help fund cleanup and better safety measures."

Informality did not ask CCA what the fees are for vendors and food trucks, but have been told by some vendors these fees vary.

Says Weinberger, "In the beginning, First Friday was a night for the art community and their patrons to come together for shows and camaraderie — We'd like to see it return to that."

In the East Crossroads, Thomas Luna, Artist and Gallery/Program Manager of Vulpes Bastille notes, "I think, speaking for Vulpes, it hasn't really affected our foot traffic on First Friday. While I remember what it was like pre-2010 to go to First Fridays and walk around, I don't

think the food trucks are particularly problematic. If anything, their removal (of the food trucks) from this months...art walk will encourage people to spend money at brick and mortar restaurants which I (personally speaking) am a proponent for. As always, I think the shift from art to commerce is an unfortunate reality of the cycle of gentrification. Following cheap rents, artists move in, the art scene gets noticed, businesses move in to capitalize on a new niche audience, and following that, commercial real estate and popular events push out the artists who catalyzed that neighborhood."

Luna continues, "The tragic event that occurred last month isn't so much a problem that is caused by food trucks, it's caused by the lack of infrastructure surrounding a cultural happening such as First Fridays. How do you maintain a safe, inviting environment for people to enjoy entertainment...in reality, First Fridays is an entertainment event hosted by the new entertainment district of KC...while keeping the feeling of freedom and joyful recreation that First Fridays brings? No one I think wants streets blocked off like in Westport or Power & Light ." (two areas in Kansas City that are also hosts to major pedestrian traffic). "It's a problem that will take a lot of work and a lot of heads to successfully approach. I think the removal of the food trucks is a Band-Aid measure to try and cut down on such concentrated amounts of people in one area."

Going forward, does the Crossroads Community Association have a plan to control areas of congestion while still offering free and easy access throughout the Crossroads Arts District to all who visit on First Friday? Julie Johnson replies, "Yes, plans moving forward are in place but we will be taking the slower winter months to make any finalization." It asks the question, will they provide fewer permits and fees?

Kansas City is working hard to place itself alongside other cities with a strongly supported arts and culture community, rather than relegated to "red state" or "flyover" status, albeit at the expense of pushing artists and low-income residents further and further away from the city center. Focus must return to the original intent of First Friday - a simple, unhurried existence of showcasing the art and artists of Kansas City inside brick and mortar art spaces that spend money and sweat equity to attract visitors and collectors, something vitally important to the health of the city's art community. Organizations like the Crossroads Community Association have an opportunity to rethink their strategy in what the future of First Friday looks like by not compromising it with far too many licensing and permit fees that bring in an over-saturation of vendors.



This work in particular, depicts our perverse relationship with guns and social interaction. Candy Coated Fear and Greed, Linda Lighton, clay, glaze, china paint, lustres, 2011

The August shooting could have happened anywhere. Kansas City has a problem with gun violence and this tragic event is one among many that plague our city. It is impossible to determine whether or not the congestion of people congregating around the food trucks contributed or not. But it is well known that the proliferation of street artists, vendors, and food trucks make walking extremely difficult, sometimes pushing pedestrians into the street where auto traffic is equally aggressive. Thus, over the years, First Friday has turned from a cultural experience to a personal safety issue.

Now that the slate has been wiped clean, for this month only it seems, the galleries and visitors to First Friday can let the Crossroads Community Association know what sort of cultural atmosphere they want for the Crossroads Arts District. Will it be a fairgrounds-like carnival or something that matures organically over time, ensuring Kansas City continues its rightful trajectory as a strong and vital arts community?