

WAM drums up pledges to change

We Are Many Festival focuses on sustainability

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In late August Saskatoon streets will rumble as car enthusiasts gas up for the annual Cruise Weekend, but this year residents will also have the chance do some good for Mother Earth with the We Are Many (WAM) Festival.

The festival, to be held

Aug. 22-24 in Diefenbaker Park, is designed to develop environmental awareness and encourage people to make small changes for sustainability.

All the main organizers involved in WAM -- a youth-driven, non-profit event -- are under the age of 30. Vinay Kumar Mysore, one of the co-ordinators, said their efforts focus on practical changes with tangible benefits.

He said sometimes people feel like they can only be hyper-environmental or hugely wasteful, but nothing in between.

"I think the strength of this festival is that we recognize that sometimes you're going to have to use a car, sometimes you're going have to take a plane," he said. "We are focusing on some small changes we can make that can have a large effect if people do them together."

WAM attendees, expected to be in the thousands, will be invited to sign a pledge committing to make changes like biking to work, using energy-efficient light bulbs and composting. With help from the City of Saskatoon, organizers will then monitor landfill use, water consumption, bus ridership and energy usage to document the effect of the festival.

Slated to share the message of sustainability are a host of musicians, authors and artists. Performers include headlining act The Weakerthans, Fred Penner, Boots Riley, Silk-E of the Coup, Theresa Sokyrka and Tom Jackson. Saskatoon acts Maybe Smith and the Fjords are also scheduled to appear.

In addition to music, authors including Life of Pi writer Yann Martel and Guy Vanderhaeghe, author of The Englishman's Boy, will participate in literary workshops.

Martel said he was happy to get involved in an event that is trying to do something to change the world.

"Change always starts with a minority. Because the city has been going through an economic boom . . . people buy big cars, SUVs. The environmental crisis is not right in front of us. It's a subtle thing," he said. "Those are all things you can kind of ignore on a daily basis so the agents of change are the ones who can see beyond what's right in front of their eyes. That tends to be young people, more motivated people."

Martel, Vanderhaeghe and authors Louise Halfe, Leona Theis and Dave Carpenter will oversee the literary workshops. WAM is also holding a short fiction contest,

which Martel will judge.

WAM is being made possible by \$40,000 from the Hunt Alternatives Fund, an American grant program. Also, the Government of Saskatchewan and City of Saskatoon each contributed \$22,500.

City transit will offer a reduced bus fee of \$1 for all buses during the weekend of the festival. Organizers are encouraging attendees to walk, bike or bus to the event as parking will be extremely limited. Admission to the event is by donation.

WAM, a pilot project model for other cities, is not meant to be annual event. It is hoped that the positive effects of the festival will continue in Saskatoon for years to come. For more information visit www.wearemanyfestival.com.

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