

Azalea Festival faces tough economy,

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Fewer sponsorships and less-than-hoped-for funding from the city isn't stopping Pickens Azalea Festival organizers from moving forward with plans to expand this year's event.

This year's festival will be held over three days – up from the traditional 2-day affair – beginning April 16 in downtown Pickens.

Organizers also plan to expand the festival site across U.S. 178 to West Main Street, according to Jeannie Gilstrap, secretary of the Azalea Festival committee.

The committee asked the Pickens City Council earlier this week for \$10,000 to help support this year's event, but the council agreed instead to allocate \$5,000, plus in-kind services.

"We honestly felt that we would probably receive less because of the economic situation everywhere, so we're grateful for the \$5,000," Gilstrap said. "Generally we have sponsorships that help us with the expenses, but those are down so far this year."

Now in its 25th year, this year's festival will include a car cruise-in, live music,

amusement rides, helicopter rides, arts and craft vendors, and plenty of food, Gilstrap said.

This year's expansion is expected to help boost total attendance, she said.

"We typically have about 17,000 to 18,000 people," Gilstrap said. "We think we're going to be at about 25,000 this year."

Pickens City Council member Connie Bowers

weakened sponsorship

said the festival is a great attraction for Pickens.

"It brings a lot of people to town," he said. "It showcases the town in a good light."

He said the city gave \$6,000 to the festival last year with the understanding that \$5,000 would be given this year.

"The city will certainly do what it can in the way of sponsorship," Bowers said.

"We're facing a budget crunch like everybody else."

Bowers said the \$5,000 is in addition to in-kind services the city provides, including police and streets and sanitation clean-up that have cost about \$10,000 in years past.

He said that a three-day event this year would add around \$5,000 in-kind services.