

SOUNDS OF SILENCE

Mercer Community Band cancels 43rd season

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MERCER — For 42 straight years, Mercer Community Band has filled the courthouse square on summer's Friday nights with the sounds of Broadway, John Philip Sousa, jazz and Americana.

This summer, though, like so many things during the era of COVID-19, the square will fall silent.

"For the last 42 years, we've been billed as the best free entertainment on a Friday night," director Hendley Hoge said. "But a lot of our musicians, and a lot of our crowd are vulnerable."



Hoge



R-A file

MERCER — The crowd packs the Mercer County Courthouse square during a 2007 performance by the Mercer Community Band.

The slate of eight free concerts is canceled for this summer, but as soon as the county is moved to the state's Green COVID-19 phase, and as soon as it's safe, Hoge plans to hold a celebration concert.

"If it's in September, we'll do it in September," he said. "If it's in October, we'll do it in October on the courthouse lawn. Because I owe that to my musicians, and I owe that to my concert-goers. And if I plan for a celebration

concert, I'm going to be pulling out all the stops."

He'll pull some of the highlights from a season that would have featured hits from Hollywood and Broadway, as well as

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timeless classics like, "There's No Business Like Show Business."

"Our musicians are disappointed, but they understood why we had to do it," Hoge said. "And they're looking forward to performing again."

Hoge has a roster of about 120 artists, with 90 to 100 taking the bandstand most Friday nights between June and August.

But, to be sure, it's not just the musicians and Hoge making the music.

There's also a band staff of 25 — sound engineers, assistant directors, librarians and more — as well as the local groups like the Eastern Star, the Catholic church and others that hold the fund-raising ice cream social that comes as part of the package deal.

And all of them, Hoge said, are volunteers.

The event draws about 5,000 people per season, and costs about \$7,000 to put on, for purchasing the music the musicians play, printing programs and paying for publicity, among other costs.

To seat the whole band normally requires erecting scaffolding to complement the band stand. Because that requires a lot of work, the band will set up on the courthouse lawn, which was the way prior to the bandstand being built in 1987.

In addition to the celebration concert, Hoge said they're still planning for the annual Christmas concert Dec. 6.