

Boosters have had their fill of Fillmore

Annual dinner looks to change name

By Alex Friedrich

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Millard Fillmore is so outta here.

The former U.S. president served his purpose for 14 years as namesake of St. Paul's annual town dinner. But now, the dinner's host is showing him the door.

They realize the 13th president is not exactly an A-lister. And whatever symbolic connection he had with St. Paul's progress peaked about four years ago.

So the sponsor of the Millard Fillmore Dinner, the St. Paul Riverfront Corp., is trying to come up with another name.

President Fillmore "might be a little obsolete now and not reflective of our purpose," said the corporation's executive director, Patrick Seeb.

The dinner is arguably the civic highlight of the year. It attracts about 1,200 local executives, politicians, activists and community leaders to eat, drink and network.

The 2008 gathering was held Thursday night at the St. Paul RiverCentre's Grand Ballroom.

Seeb said the dinner is a way to look back on civic and economic accomplishments, anticipate new opportunities and generally celebrate the river.

"It's sort of the spring pep rally in St. Paul," he said. "It's a chance once a year to see all the important people you want to connect with."

Fillmore got his foot in the door with the Riverfront folks when they named the first dinner after him back in 1995.

At the time, the city was trying to generate interest in a project called Grand Excursion 2004, a re-enactment of the Mississippi River's Grand Excursion that had boosted the fortunes of St. Paul 150

years before.

As part of the original 1854 excursion, Fillmore, who was president from 1850 to 1853, led a group of 1,200 people up the river to St. Paul. The steamboat trip from the Quad Cities attracted investment and settlers to the area, and the Riverfront Corp.'s Web site now calls it "a blockbuster event that catapulted the upper Mississippi and Saint Paul into mainstream America."

The 2004 re-enactment, the Web site boasts, "produced similar benefits by driving redevelopment projects in Saint Paul and around the region, while reintroducing the world to the river that makes Saint Paul great."

Well, that was then.

The re-enactment was four years ago, and these days, Seeb said, "People have this quizzical look when we bring up Millard Fillmore."

So the Riverfront Corp. folks have hired a consultant and begun brainstorming.

Seeb said, "We're asking, 'What is the value of this dinner? Why is it the most successful, best-attended dinner in the city? What was it that people valued at the dinner?'"

They're not sure yet whether they'll name the dinner after another figure, a thing or a general theme. But Seeb said they hope to have an answer by August.

On Thursday evening, some pre-dinner minglers had their own ideas, with most suggesting a river or town hall theme.

Mayor Chris Coleman jokingly suggested naming it "after another failed presidency."

But public-relations consultant Ted Davis said, "I think the Millard Fillmore Dinner worked. It was goofy. I'm sad to see it go."

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