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SoCo festivals are popping up like wildflowers

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Can you think of anything the Santa Rosa area could use more of?

OK, anything other than In-N-Out burgers, \$75,000 jobs and secret, scenic bypasses.

If you answered that there's room in and around Rose City for more truly distinctive, impressive, people-pleasing annual festivals of music and the arts, then we're in perfect harmony.

There has been a dearth of yearly, can't-miss-it festivals hereabout, but there's a host of creative sorts working to remedy that situation. Forgive me if I've left anyone out, but these visionaries include the promoters of three talent-rich public events that all happen next weekend.

THE HANDCAR REGATTA has the feel of an imaginative, whimsical, historical Railroad Square event that could very well take hold and become a huge draw for the city's old-town district.

The centerpiece of the inaugural Regatta, which happens next Sunday all around the depot, is what looks to be a hysterical competition among people-powered contraptions along a stretch of the Square's rails.

The driving force behind this first Great Handcar Regatta (www.handcar-regatta.com) is Ty Jones, a West End resident, art gallery owner and interior designer.

He and a couple of partners secured a city arts grant to create what they hope will become an anticipated annual celebration of art, human ingenuity, healthful transportation, intentional silliness, music and food.

The vision for an enduring, alluring new downtown fest is shared by a cornucopia of

organizations that will take part in this first Regatta on and along the city's storied train tracks.

You on board?

WHAT A SIGHT it will be — and what a sound — when a happy crowd fills up the great lawn at west Santa Rosa's idyllic Earle Baum Center of the Blind for Saturday's first-ever EarleFest, a celebration of Americana music.

Featured performers include country-rock pioneer Chris Hillman, a founding member of The Byrds and later one of The Flying Burrito Brothers, and bluegrass banjo picker Herb Pedersen, who performed with Hillman in the Desert Rose Band. They'll be joined by the Otis Taylor Band, Blue & Lonesome and Corinne West & the Posse.

Allen Brenner, the Baum Center's director, envisions not a fund-raiser with music but a bonafide, big-league Americana music festival that happens to support the center's mission and myriad services.

Music master Bill Bowker of KRSH radio has helped the Baum Center create the first EarleFest — a play on North Carolina's annual tribute to the music of Doc and Merle Watson — and Bill will emcee.

FOR JIMMY MAC: This is year No. 3 for a Wine Country rarity — a variety show that draws musical and comedy talent from the Bay Area and also L.A.

Santa Rosa Live, coming Saturday to Healdsburg's Raven Theater, is a sharp, professional production that honors Jimmy MacDonald, the 1987 Piner High graduate who became a policeman and was gunned down in Compton in 1993.

The show (www.jimmymac.org) is organized and emceed by MacDonald's friend and fellow Piner alum Steve Niel, now a Hollywood actor and comic.

On stage Saturday will be the Shannon Ryder Band, rising pop star Midori Longo and Audioclique, comedy singers The Baudettes and Daniel Rosenthal, an astonishing 11-year-old magician who's delighted cancer patients at Kaiser in Santa Rosa and taken his show to the Middle East.

As Sonoma County gives birth to more annual festivals and celebrations like these, you hear less and less, "Sure, it's beautiful here, but there's nothing to do."

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