

THE BUFFALO NEWS CITY & REGION

Wallenda concerned about his welcome

BY Charlie Specht - NEWS NIAGARA REPORTER

on May 16, 2012 - 12:01 AM

Nik Wallenda is practicing his wire-walk at the Seneca Niagara Casino as a thank-you to the state officials who allowed him to perform the stunt and to inject some life into a tourist city that has seen decades of decay.

He's now wondering whether officials on the American side are happy to have him.

A number of roadblocks have arisen locally, the stuntman said Tuesday, while Canada has laid out the welcome mat and is more ready to capitalize on the prime-time, once-in-a-lifetime event.

"Over there, it's like they're all on the same team and working as a team," Wallenda told The Buffalo News on Tuesday. "I don't see that over here."

While some officials are working hard on the event, the stuntman said others have been reluctant to embrace it.

His crews were hassled by local police officers when erecting the practice wire at the casino, he said. Then, as crowds gathered on Mother's Day to watch him walk the wire, a police officer ticketed spectators' cars that were parked on streets around the casino.

"It honest to God, broke my heart," Wallenda said. "It's probably the

last time [they'll come to the falls]."

No promotional signs are set up at any of the city's entrances, others noted, and Wallenda said he hasn't been in contact with officials charged with promoting the stunt.

Meanwhile, officials in Niagara Falls, Ont. -- some of whom initially opposed the wire-walk -- have been in regular phone contact with him, he said, and also stand to make tens of thousands of dollars by renting out government-run restaurants and parks around the falls.

"They're capitalizing on it," he said. "Let's help him help us -- that's [Niagara Falls, Ont., Mayor Jim Diodati's] attitude."

Wallenda said government red tape or politics could be playing a role on the American side, particularly the mutual contempt between State Sen. George D. Maziarz, Wallenda's chief supporter, and Niagara Falls Mayor Paul A. Dyster.

The mayor scoffed at that notion.

"If someone is telling him someone is trying to sabotage this event for political reasons, that's just a lie," Dyster said. "We're determined to make this event a success."

The city needs to take advantage of the palpable excitement happening daily in the downtown area, others said.

"This is a game-changer for this city and its future," resident Diane Tattersoll told the City Council on Monday. "If ever our city officials and department heads came together, this is now. This shouts exposure, and this is the real deal."

Others, though, say they are working furiously each day to make the event a success.

"There are a huge number of people scrambling around and trying to make the event a success and of maximum benefit to the community

and a great experience for visitors," Dyster said.

John Percy, president and chief executive of the Niagara Tourism & Convention Corp., noted that a meeting of stakeholders is scheduled for today, and his agency has incorporated Wallenda's event into its Northeast magazine marketing campaign.

In addition, the agency has created a website, walkthefalls.com, that features a list of events, hotel information and other logistics.

The USA Niagara Development Corp., meanwhile, has planned big-screen televisions, food vendors, artists, circus performances and other children's events on Old Falls Street, between Niagara Falls State Park and the casino.

The city on Tuesday also drafted legislation that would allow temporary vending, at a fee between \$100 and \$150, to operate in the downtown area during Wallenda's stunt. Dyster said the city also is opening the former parking ramp in the Rainbow Centre mall to accommodate the crowds and has sought out vendors from previous festivals.

Because the city still has not received more than \$50 million in casino revenue from the Senecas and state, Dyster said, it doesn't have extra money to send crews to spruce up the areas around the casino.

"It's kind of ironic and unfortunate that just as the city is supposed to be showing off for this event, the funds to do these extra things is not there," Dyster said.

He added, "People who don't live here and only pass through as tourists don't realize that this is one of the poorest cities in New York State, and the ability to put on events for visitors depends on having these [casino] sources as revenues."

A number of local officials said they were ready to market and prepare for Wallenda's stunt but had to wait for the date to be announced.

"The date just got announced less than two weeks ago, so you've got a six- to seven-week window to plan everything," Percy said. "I'd be happy to sit down with [Wallenda] and ask what can we do and make sure, whatever his concerns are, that they are addressed. We've got to make sure we're on the same page and deliver a seamless event."

Police Superintendent John R. Chella said Wallenda's crews were drilling near the casino without water, which created a large amount of dust and a traffic hazard. He said the officer allowed drilling to resume once water was used. The city issued the traffic tickets on Mother's Day, he added, noting that the illegally parked cars were a safety hazard.