

Virginia Beach tells Falwell he's too political for festival

By Warren Strobel
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Virginia Beach festival organizers, citing the Rev. Jerry Falwell's recent controversial statements on racially troubled South Africa, yesterday withdrew a speaking invitation to the minister — just in time to cool a simmering political controversy.

"It's a fun weekend, and we didn't want it to get involved with controversy and politics," said Douglas Talbot, chairman of the Neptune Festival, where Mr. Falwell was slated to speak at a prayer breakfast. "It was starting to take those overtones."

"Talbot, in his personal bigotry, has denied me the privilege of free speech and the right to express my own opinion," The Associated Press quoted Mr. Falwell as saying.

Upon his return from a five-day trip to South Africa last week, Mr. Falwell announced that the Moral Majority would launch a \$1 million campaign to lobby U.S. lawmakers against imposing sanctions on the troubled nation.

He called Anglican Archbishop Desmond M. Tutu, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, "a phony" who does not

represent black South Africans. He later apologized for the remark.

"I think that [Mr. Falwell's statements] certainly had some part" in the decision to drop him from the prayer breakfast, Mr. Talbot said.

The Neptune Festival is a week-long city celebration centered on the city's boardwalk. It includes a ball, the crowning of King Neptune and — this year — a magic show.

"We're going to make the King [Neptune] disappear," Mr. Talbot said. "In this case, we've already made Jerry Falwell disappear."

The festival, including the Sept. 27 prayer breakfast, is sponsored by the Virginia Beach Chamber of Commerce, with the city's help.

Mr. Falwell said his office was "flooded with calls today" from chamber members upset with the festival action, and he has accepted an invitation to speak at a separate chamber prayer breakfast the same day, the AP reported.

The controversy began simmering about 10 days ago, when several television stations and newspapers reported on Mr. Falwell's scheduled appearance, said Glenn Croshaw, chairman of the city's Democratic committee.

"When the press picked it up, the ball started rolling," Mr. Croshaw said.

Mr. Talbot said he received numerous calls of concern from "ministers and various and sundry officials in the city."

Among the worried was Virginia Beach Mayor Harold Heischober. Mr. Heischober, a Republican, during deliberations yesterday sided with those who wanted Mr. Falwell dropped from the breakfast, Mr. Talbot said.

Controversy generated by Mr. Falwell's statements could create security problems for Virginia Beach, dampen interest in the festival and put Virginia Beach in an unfavorable light, Mr. Heischober said.

However, Gordon Harper, chairman of the prayer breakfast committee, was quoted by a top Virginia Beach Democrat as saying, "This is just Democratic nonsense."

"My fear is that I don't think anybody knows what Jerry Falwell is going to inflame next," Mr. Croshaw said. "What forest will burn next?"

"I feel very proud of Virginia Beach tonight," he said. "A lot prouder than I felt this morning."