

County departments gearing up for Camporee

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Coal and oilfield equipment displayed at Energy Park in Gillette. With the International Pathfinders Camporee coming to Gillette in less than 300 days, the organization is seeing a lot of demand for the visitors center's coal mine tours. Camporee is paying to bring in bigger buses so that more people can see where coal comes from.

Ed Glazar

It's been close to three years since the International Pathfinders Camporee announced that it was coming to Gillette from Aug. 5-11, 2024.

The event is expected to bring in an estimated 55,000 people to Campbell County, and so far more than 34,000 tickets have been bought by Pathfinders in the U.S., Canada and 33 other countries.

Now, there are fewer than 300 days before the Pathfinders arrive.

An event of this size naturally raises many questions from a community that has never hosted it before. One big question is the flow of traffic coming into Gillette that week. What does it look like to have tens of thousands of people converging in a town in northeast Wyoming?

Well, they won't be descending upon Gillette all at once, said Pastor Ron Whitehead. The travel is being worked out strategically to avoid traffic jams.

"That's what you ran into with the eclipse ... (is) traffic on the freeways that create gridlock. We've studied that," Whitehead said, referring to the 2017 total solar eclipse.

That astronomical event saw about 260,000 people traveling in Wyoming, including 192,000 who came from out of state, according to an economic analysis that was done for the Wyoming Office of Tourism.

Pathfinders will be traveling with their clubs in groups of dozens. About 40,000 will arrive on Monday, Aug. 5, 2024. And between 4,000 and 5,000 volunteers will arrive the week before.

Aaron Lyles, executive director of Cam-plex, said that during the National High School Finals Rodeo, the contestants came in on one road and had to get checked in before going to their campsite. They experienced wait times of 25 to 45 minutes at the max, Lyles said, while he heard from some contestants that they've waited several hours in other communities to get checked in.

With Camporee, the clubs know where they're staying ahead of time, so they'll go to their campsite before going into the Wyoming Center to check in.

Each region has its own camping area, as well as an access point off of a road, so that Pathfinders won't have to be going through another region's campsite to get to their own.

In total, there are nine entrances off of Boxelder Road, Garner Lake Road, Fox Park Avenue or Highway 51.

Lyles said he can load 4,500 people in and out of the Wyoming Center in half an hour.

"If you do the math, if I load 4,500 people on the Cam-plex grounds every 30 minutes," he said. "To get 60,000 here has actually never been a concern or scared me at all."

Last week, county department directors met with Camporee officials to make sure everyone is on the same page on what they're responsible for and what still needs to be done.

Some are flying in to Gillette, while others will be driving. And some clubs will be doing both, flying into Salt Lake City or Denver and then making the drive to Gillette.

With the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally going on at the same time, the Pathfinders coming from the east have been given a heads up to avoid that area if they don't want to get stuck in traffic.

Many Pathfinder clubs are going to take the opportunity to visit some of the natural landmarks this part of the country has to offer on their way to Gillette.

"They plan out how they're going to get here, what they're going to do while they're here. Part of getting here is exciting, whether they stop in Denver or they stop in Yellowstone, so it's all planned," said Roger Wade, the onsite communications director for Camporee.

Whitehead, the director of Camporee, said it wasn't just the facilities, such as Cam-plex, the Rec Center and Energy Capital Sports Complex that attracted the Pathfinders to Gillette.

The 2021 special election to form an independent college district spoke volumes about Campbell County, Whitehead said, and nonprofit organizations such as the Campbell County Senior Center and the YES House offer a helping hand to those who need it most.

"You take care of the young, and you take care of the old. And that's the values of Pathfinders," he said.

Even though Campbell County has never experienced this many people at one time, county directors are confident that they, with a lot of help from Camporee, will be able to pull it off without too many hiccups.

Camporee's night-time activities will be taking place at Cam-plex Park. Dwayne Dillinger, executive director of Campbell County Parks and Recreation, said Cam-plex Park will be open to the public during the day.

Camporee has not designated any activities for the park, and it will have security 24/7 around the stage, Whitehead said. So Gillette residents will be able to use the park during the day the week of Camporee.

During Aug. 6-9, 2024, the Rec Center will be open for 67 hours, and Camporee will be in the Rec Center for 26 hours, or 39% of the time. It won't be using the entire Rec Center, and portions of the facility — the weight room and second floor — will remain open to the public the entire time.

Other parts of it, including the gym, climbing tower, swimming pools and field house, will be open to residents in the early morning and at night.

Camporee also can help if the Rec Center needs help manning the pools.

"If we're short lifeguards, they can supplement that," Dillinger said. "We've explained to them how that works, they would have to come in three to four days before, do the swim test and skills test required by insurance and Red Cross."

Greg and Kim Taylor, directors of off-site activities for Camporee, said there are plans for mountain biking activities at the Centennial Section. Camporee will buy 40 mountain bikes in Gillette for the Pathfinders to use, and the plan is to leave those bikes here once Camporee is over and donate them to the community.

"I think it'll be really good, because we'll have some that have never mountain biked before, so we didn't want anything too intense for them," Kim Taylor said.

Landfill and roads

Public Works Director Matt Olsen said the county's North Landfill should see an increase in traffic, but that he doesn't expect the actual amount of garbage to be much more than what they're used to.

"From a tonnage standpoint, they said in Oshkosh they got 400 tons for the week," he said. "We get about 200 tons a day. I'm not terribly concerned about the tonnage at all."

Olsen said there had been discussion of setting up a temporary transfer station at Cam-plex, but added that it makes most sense to have roll-off dumpsters set up around the property. The city will have some trucks dedicated to hitting the dumpsters earlier in the day, and while drivers are on their regular routes, some of them will be diverted to Cam-plex.

The county will have to extend hours at the landfill, Olsen said, opening it a little earlier and closing it later than usual, and having it open all day on the weekend.

And Road and Bridge Director Kevin Geis said he's going to work with the Sheriff's Office, Gillette Police Department and Wyoming Highway Patrol on some potential road closures.

The Northeast Wyoming Regional Airport is expected to be busy as well. Todd Chatfield, the airport's executive director, said the airport has received 2,000 requests for incoming charter flights so far. That's about 13 to 15 planes.

It will all be scheduled so that the flights will not affect the daily commercial flights coming in, and so that they're not all coming in at once.

"That'll be our big thing, is keeping them slotted to come in at different times," Chatfield said.

Planes with a capacity of 150 to 200 passengers will be brought in to fly people out, Chatfield said. TSA will be on hand to help with that.

During the summer, the visitors center offers coal mine tours. The size of those tours is limited by the small bus. But many Pathfinders have already expressed interest in seeing where coal comes from, Whitehead said, so Camporee is paying to have bigger buses come in.

“Our crowd would love that,” he said, adding that this is a chance for Campbell County to tell its story to a wider audience. “It’s a great story that’s not being told.”

Whitehead said while Camporee will be an inconvenience to Gillette residents for a week or two, the goal is to leave the community better than when it arrived. That’s why it’s scheduled more than 30 community service projects and is making investments for Pathfinders to learn about the area.

“We want to be a blessing,” he said.

Jonathan Gallardo