

Balloons Over Bend Full of hot air, fun

by K_Guice

The fourth annual LibertyBank Balloons Over Bend launches this weekend, but not without some questions over how taxpayer funds were allocated for the popular event.

The high-flying event takes place June 10 and 11 at Summit High School at 6:30 a.m. If that sounds too early, there is an evening alternative. Night Glow, presented by Kirby Nagelhout Construction, will be held at Pilot Butte State Park starting at 6 p.m. on June 10 with live music, food booths and inflatable rides for kids. At sunset, the hot air balloons will glow to music.

So, what could be controversial about a hot air balloon event? At a Bend City Council meeting on March 15, Mayor Bill Friedman expressed concerns over \$18,000 of tax revenue being allocated in connection with the event. According to the minutes of the meeting, Friedman stated he doesn't think public money should be spent on private enterprise and doesn't support the funding to Balloons Over Bend. He is troubled that the Downtowners have asked for continuing support.

John Hummel, a member of the city council, says the money was to cover expenses related to the event, not to Impressive Events running the event. Ultimately, Hummel said, "The city agreed because it brings in tourism and tourism dollars for business."

Barb Malcom of Impressive Events states that is exactly where the transient room tax (TRT) dollars went, to tourism. Malcom, who founded the event for the Chamber of Commerce back in 2003 as an employee of the Chamber, has recently brought the event back through her company.

“The dollars were not allocated to Impressive Events,” she says. “The money went directly to Bend Visitor Center to market the event to Portland and Eugene to generate tourism to our community.”

The TRT dollars are to be used for an event that will draw people to the community and Malcom says Balloons Over Bend is a good fit for that. Hummel agrees, “This is a fabulous event and it came out of nowhere.”

“It is one of those sleeper events and it just exploded,” Hummel added. “Over the next few years it will become one of those signature events.”

That is not a lot of hot air. The event is expected to attract in excess of 10,000 sky watchers with their eyes on 25 hot air balloons that have come together from all over the United States.

Steve Peters, the balloonmeister for Balloons Over Bend has been with the event from the beginning. An aeronaut since 1982, he says there is a lot of excitement with so many balloons at a central location.

Wendy Robinson, a volunteer, was hooked after the first year. "You had me at hello," she says about the event. She will never miss the event again.

While Peters helps run the event, from selecting qualified pilots to making sure the weather is conducive to flying; he also launches his own balloon, Starlight.

He says it's magical. "From the first time to the last time I went up, the feeling is the same - it is exciting."

"The take-offs and landings are very gentle. Before you know it you are hundreds or even thousands of

feet in the air, just floating," said Peters. "It's very peaceful."

Saturday night as dusk begins to settle over the city, half a dozen tethered balloons will inflate to illuminate the night sky, casting a warm glow over the event and creating a sight to be savored. "Night Glow is very similar to fireworks displays - spectacular," Malcom exclaimed.

Malcom believes it is sure to be one of the most exciting aspects of this year's rally. Attendees will be treated to the music of "Two Eds and Friends." In addition, people are invited to sample the mouth-watering cuisine of a variety of local food vendors, and relax at the beer garden hosted by Deschutes Brewery. Not to be left out, youngsters will also be treated to an array of family-oriented games and kid-friendly activities.

According to Malcom, balloon rallies are typically very successful for communities all over the United States. Services such as lodging are typically booked several months in advance.

"What results is more dollars spent on shopping, eating and gasoline - in turn providing for a richer community and folks spending dollars locally," she says. The ten-year plan for the Bend rally is to fill all the beds in the lodging sector and thereby boost the economic vitality of Central Oregon in general.

For additional information about Balloons Over Bend contact Impressive Events at 383-8268. Bend Oregon
Central Oregon Bend Weekly

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