

Lee: 2016 Red Rock Balloon Rally a ‘success’

Written by By Bernie Dotson Sun Correspondent
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Weather shaky, but there was liftoff; parade excites

The 36th annual Red Rock Balloon Rally was a tremendous success and organizers are already in the process of planning next year's rally.

That was the word this week from Bill Lee, chief executive officer of the Gallup-McKinley County Chamber of Commerce and president of the Red Rock Balloon Rally Association, and a pilot who flies in balloon rallies across the United States year-round.

"Overall, it went very well," Lee said. "There were 140 (balloon) registrants which is about average over the past few years."

Lee, a Gallup native who was elected to the McKinley County Board of Commissioners earlier this year, said there were two full days of flying for the balloon rally participants. He said there was a flyover on Friday (Dec. 2) and a mass ascension the following Sunday. Lee said Friday flights from Red Rock Park were grounded due to the fact that winds were blowing in a southern direction. He said that's the first time he can recall that kind wind direction happening.

"That direction would have put balloons over Fort Wingate which is a restricted area at the moment," Lee said. Lee also said Saturday flights at Red Rock Park were grounded due to a very "low ceiling of clouds."

"Balloons are only allowed in visual flight rules conditions," he said. "It would have been illegal and dangerous for us to launch in those conditions."

The launch points this year were at various city parks and at a few Gallup schools. The usual Fox Run Golf Course launch point, a main attraction for some balloonists, was cancelled this year due to improvements taking place at Fox Run. Lee said even when the balloons don't go up in the air that it's a win for Gallup and McKinley County because the people connected to the rally go shopping and spend their money at gas stations and grocery stores and at Rio West

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Mall.

"There's a lot of benefit in having that many people in Gallup," Lee said. "It really is a positive event with spinoff effects."

Lee, who flies a balloon with a state tourism logo on it, said there were 30 balloons that participated in the balloon glow at Rio West Mall on Dec. 3. "It was spectacular and we saw a very large crowd," Lee said. "Just spectacular."

Jenny Yazzie of nearby Window Rock, Ariz., saw the balloon glow after doing some Christmas shopping at the mall. As someone who is from the area, the balloon rally is considered a major event.

"I've seen the balloon glow many times over the years," Yazzie, 28, said. "Everybody who can't go up in a balloon, they usually come to the mall for the glow."

Lee said a parade held on Saturday was well-attended by locals and out-of-towners. "The parade was very successful," Lee said. "I think everyone enjoyed it."

The Red Rock Balloon Rally is the second largest such rally in New Mexico and is considered the third largest in the world. The Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta is the largest balloon rally in the world, and the Lorraine Mondial Rally in France is third largest in the world. The France rally is staged every other year.

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