



Photo courtesy of LakeFun.com

Looking ahead after the season

The curtain has closed on one of the most challenging yet potentially record-setting summer seasons at the Lake of the Ozarks.

Bikefest, dubbed a mini-Sturgis by some news media, was the final major event of the year for Lake Ozark. The Sept. 18-20 motorcycle rally unofficially drew upwards of 125,000 riders to the lake area, with motorcycles scattered from Versailles, to Camdenton, to Lake Ozark and Osage Beach to Eldon.

There were no major issues associated with the throngs of riders who filled nearly every lodging facility, restaurant, bar and parking lot for 30 miles. Residents from as far away as Versailles say they've never seen so many motorcycles in their community.

After a statewide shutdown of commerce and schooling began in mid-March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were ripples of concern that the lake-area economy might suffer deeply. The major communities that serve the lake – Lake Ozark, Osage Beach, Camdenton, Eldon and Versailles – rely on sales tax as a major source of income. Without the usual influx of tourist dollars, communities quickly scaled back not only their capital projects but their personnel.

The Magic Dragon Street Meet Nationals Car Show in early May was the first victim of the pandemic, although the loss of the annual St. Patrick's Day Parade in Lake Ozark due to the coronavirus signaled what many feared might happen.

But then, Gov. Mike Parsons relaxed the statewide lockdown prior to the Memorial Day Weekend and the masses of tourists from nearly every corner of the country descended on the lake. National media exposure only heightened the influx of people wanting to experience the freedoms available at the lake.

Most lake-area events were rescheduled for later in the season.

And the rest is history: Probable record-setting revenues for local businesses, lodging establishments and – hopefully –

the communities that braced for the worst in March.

Aftermath

Lake Ozark was able to enjoy a resurgence of economic activity after the tourist season kicked into gear in May. Even with social distancing and masking recommendations in place, Lake Ozark businesses flourished.

The Bikefest finale a couple of weeks ago amplified issues evident during other major events. There are growing pains associated with the unprecedented economic gains.

Lake Ozark Ward 2 Alderman Larry Giampa told the board and city officials during a recent board meeting that something has to be done during next year's Bikefest to address traffic flow and parking.

Motorcycles at one point during the weekend were parked in the center lane and elsewhere from near Bagnell Dam to near the Lake Ozark Fire Station – a half mile away. Traffic flow was thwarted.

"There were huge dump truck drivers looking left and right as they squeezed between the motorcycles," he noted. "All they had to do was touch one of those bikes and it was dominoes. And there was a huge cattle hauler driving down The Strip as well, and that street is in bad shape."

Giampa's suggestion is to close Bagnell Dam Blvd. to thru-traffic during a portion of the Bikefest weekend. The general public would be re-routed during that time.

"All you need is one accident. Can you imagine the reaction if 90 bikes fell over? Traffic flow really has to be thought about next year," he offered.

New thinking

Giampa, also a business owner on The Strip, took exception with the belief among some residents that the community's grocery store, T-shirt shops and other small retailers were the draw for tourists.

"When I first came to this community, I

was told the biggest money makers were Paul's Supermarket (now Wood's) and the T-shirt shops. I'm just going to say that nobody came 300 miles to buy a loaf of bread.

"The two things that bring people to this area are the Lake, which is by far the largest draw, and The Strip," Giampa said. "Yes, The Strip costs us money, it costs more for police, it costs more for maintenance, it costs more for this and that, but the money coming in the door is to see the lake and us on The Strip. They're not coming here to buy a \$35 T-shirt. If it wasn't for the water, we'd be dead."

The alderman said he thinks city and economic development officials need to be more visionary in their promotion of Lake Ozark.

"Seriously, 100,000 bikers didn't come here to buy a loaf of bread," he said.

Cleanup

As city officials look at change for 2021 there will likely be a focus on how to keep The Strip clean. Thousands of tourists and local residents eat, drink and shop on the popular destination and often leave behind the remnants of their visit.

Giampa echoed concerns shared by fellow Ward 1 Alderman Judy Neels who has long been a proponent of keeping The Strip clean.

"Judy talks about cleaning it up, but we also need to figure out a way to do that and look more modern," Giampa offered. "We just gotta clean it up."

Bikefest riders, other visitors and even local residents left behind a lot of trash, and even Mayor Gerry Murawski was seen late in the night of Sept. 19 doing his part in picking up trash before Sunday brought more traffic to The Strip.

Alderman Dennis Klautzer offered a little perspective on the season.

"Let's put this in perspective and look back 20 years, where we were then and where we are now. I think we're in a better place now," he offered. "Let's not focus our attention or vision on the negative. It's