Balloon fest sees success in 31st year

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Visitors watch as hot-air balloons prepare to launch during Freedom Weekend Aloft, held over the Memorial Day weekend at Heritage Park in Simpsonville. See more photos at GreenvilleOnline.com. JACKIE LEE GILMER/CONTRIBUTOR

It could be weeks before organizers know how many people ate, ran and danced their way through Heritage Park over the weekend, but supporters said all signs point to a successful 31st year for Greenville Hospital System Freedom Weekend Aloft.

This was a critical year for the festival, its sixth in Simpsonville and first since coming to an agreement with the city to catch up on back rental payments for use of the park.

Keri Hall, festival executive director, said that while this year's proceeds haven't been counted, the festival intends to pay its $30,000 debt and that she expects the festival to return to Heritage Park next year.

"Our intention is to pay that and pay it as quickly as possible," she said. "We certainly hope that Mother Nature's support will make that doable."

The festival fell behind on payments after stormy weather in 2010 killed two of its days. The weather cooperated for the most part this year.

While temperatures hovered close to 90 in the afternoons, the rain mostly stayed away and winds were usually calm enough for the hot-air balloons to launch on schedule, although stiff winds kept them tethered to the ground on Saturday night.

Admission to the park was free on Monday, Bi-Lo Day, as part of an effort to keep costs as low as possible for families. It cost $5 to park.

LaRone Chapman and Tracy Evans of Greenville said they brought three children to the festival and spent about $50 in an hour on ice cream, bouncy houses and Mountain Dew. But they were able to snag some free toys passed out by Jack in the Box.

"All in all, it's OK," Chapman said. "You know it's coming every year, so you have to just save for it."

An agreement reached with the city of Simpsonville calls for the festival to pay $7,500 per quarter starting in October and to break even by July 2013. The City Council voted 4-3 in March to affirm the festival could be held at Heritage Park this year.

Among the supporters was councilwoman Sylvia Lockaby, who on Monday watched crowds stream by while volunteering at the Simpsonville Chamber of Commerce tent.

"From what I understand, they had to turn back people Friday and Saturday," she said. "Hallelujah."

Hall said she didn't hear of anyone being turned back, but the nights were big enough that she had to personally work the gate to help keep the crowds moving.

The four-day festival started big on Friday night with a Charter Amphitheatre concert that kicked off a nationwide tour for Grammy-winning singer Colbie Caillat and Gavin DeGraw, who was fresh off "Dancing With the Stars." The momentum kept going on Saturday with big crowds for country singer Jake Owen.

"We believe we've seen some record concert crowds," Hall said. "Friday and Saturday just were huge."

It was the first year that festival-goers had the option of tossing their waste in green recycling bins instead of trash buckets, said Al Futrell, who helped organize the effort as a board member of Keep Greenville County Beautiful.

Futrell also passed out pocket ashtrays in hopes of keeping smokers from tossing their butts on the ground. He said was pleased at how it went.

"If you look around, it's pretty clean," he said.

The festival also included for the first time the Krazy Kow 5K, a 3.1-mile run through the park on Saturday.

Supporters helped keep the runners going by ringing cowbells, shouting words of encouragement and passing out water.

Also back this year were the twirling rides on the midway, leaping dogs that caught flying discs in their teeth and all the festival food a stomach could want from pizza to peanuts.

"It has been an incredible event from start to finish," Hall said.