Officials prepare for Tigers home football opener

BY GREG OLIVER
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CLEMSON — Clemson football players and coaches have been preparing for Saturday's home opener against Troy for months. The same applies to law enforcement officials when it comes to traffic control and parking.

"We've been having weekly meetings with not only the highway patrol, but also with university and state officials, city officials and anyone involved with the Game Day operation," said Clemson Police Chief Jimmy Dixon. "We began holding periodic meetings at the end of the last football season, but have been meeting more consistently during the past couple of months.

"Now that the season is here, we'll meet before and after each home game."

Dixon said that while construction is continuing on U.S. 123 and S.C. 133, he has been meeting with the S.C. Department of Transportation and contractors to ensure that all lanes are available for fans attending Saturday's game as well as the remaining six home games. But Dixon urges fans attending the game to be patient when encountering the traffic gridlock that inevitably occurs.

"We're trying to get 60,000 vehicles on a road designed for 20,000 to 30,000," he said. "There's a perception out there that we're not trying to get the traffic moving, but we want to get people to their tailgate gatherings and the game as well as back to their areas after the game as safely as possible.

"If you want to sit on your horn and scream and yell, it's not going to get you there faster."

The Clemson police chief said kiosks have been placed in specific areas, including outside the football stadium. He said that will allow individuals to obtain information on the various parking lots, what items they can take inside the stadium and so forth.

One of the biggest issues police encounter on Clemson football game days is illegal parking. Dixon said Clemson police will be stationed in the areas of Folger and Sloan street and blocking thru traffic for emergency vehicles. However, he also points out that it is the responsibility of property owners to ensure that any vehicles parked illegally on their property are towed.

Clemson Public Works Director David Conner said his crew has been busy this week placing ribbons and signage to inform motorists not to park in those areas unless they have a barricade pass. Although he doesn't expect everything to go off without a hitch, Conner feels things will get better each home football weekend.

"We'll learn from our mistakes the first game, and it will be much better the second game, third game and so forth because people will be more familiar with the routine," Conner said.

Kickoff is at 3:30 p.m. this week and next Saturday against Wofford. Motorists are reminded that College Avenue from S.C. 93 to U.S. 123 will be changed to one-way traffic leaving downtown. That means motorists will be unable to access the downtown area from U.S. 123 during that time, which typically lasts two hours from the conclusion of the game.

"We feel the early evening games are much better because everyone doesn't tend to get there at the same time," Dixon said. "However, a noon kickoff (Clemson will host Auburn at that time Sept. 17) is different, because everyone tends to get here at the same time."

While Dixon said Clemson football plays to win, he adds the school also takes seriously the responsibility of ensuring that its fans and fans of the visiting teams have an enjoyable experience.

"If you're a visitor to one of the manned barricaded areas, you will have to give a specific address to where you're going in order to be able to proceed," Dixon said. "You won't be able to say 'I'm going to John Smith's house' without providing a specific address."

Dixon added that no on-street parking is allowed in those barricaded areas, and that vehicles will be towed if parked on the streets, Wigington and North Clemson avenues, Oak and North Clemson and Pine and North Clemson.

"During a visit to Texas A&M in 2004, the warm welcome Clemson University received made a strong impression on President (Jim) Barker," Dixon said. "As a result, President Barker wanted Clemson to enforce that same type of attitude and sportsmanship that not only occurs on the field, but also outside the field and stadium.

"In my mind, that makes a big difference to those attending the games."

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FILE PHOTO

Clemson Police Chief Jimmy Dixon said law enforcement officers are committed to getting fans, like these attending Clemson home football games, to the stadium as soon as possible. The Tigers open their 2011 home season against Troy at 3:30 p.m. Saturday.