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FEATURED

What to know about the 2024 Camporee and its 50,000 visitors to Gillette

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Dueling sprinklers water new grass Thursday at Cam-plex Park in an area that will house a temporary amphitheater during the 2024 International Pathfinder Camporee.

News Record Photo/Ed Glazar

In less than a year, more than 50,000 visitors from throughout the world will descend upon Gillette, bringing with them their cultures, customs and, as Campbell County is hoping, economic impact.

When it arrives, it will be the largest event Gillette has hosted. Camporee will essentially build a city at Cam-plex, with its own newspaper, radio station, food vendors and shops.

The event runs from Aug. 5-11, 2024. So far, more than 24,000 tickets have been sold.

That's more than double the 11,000 tickets that had been sold as of early May, and no previous Camporee has sold this many tickets a year out, said Jessica Seders, executive director of the Campbell County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Those 24,000 tickets sold equates to about the combined populations of Sheridan and Buffalo. Yet it's less than half of the expected turnout.

It took years of planning to bring the International Pathfinders Camporee to Gillette. That effort dates back to before January 2021, when Camporee and local officials first announced their intent to bring the event to Gillette.

With less than a year until the week it's taken years to prepare for, here's what's known and remains to be answered about what will be the largest event Gillette has ever hosted.

What's a Camporee?

The International Pathfinders Camporee is a gathering of Pathfinders clubs from around the world.

Pathfinders clubs are each similar to a Boy Scouts of America troop, but generally open to boys and girls ages 10-15 and organized worldwide through the Seventh-Day Adventist Church.

The Pathfinders curriculum can vary by club, but generally has to do with outdoors and camping activities with a church-centric focus. The clubs earn merit badges, learn outdoor skills, go camping, learn Bible knowledge and have fun being involved in community service projects.

Camporee happens once every five years and most recently saw 55,000 in attendance from more than 100 countries for the week-long event in 2019.

Next summer, many of the 50,000-plus visitors will camp throughout the grounds of Cam-plex, but many will also seek hotel rooms and other units to rent.

For those looking for a weeklong stay at a Gillette hotel room during Camporee, you're out of luck. All of the hotel rooms in Gillette are sold out for Aug. 4-11. If you'd like to book a couple of nights, there are rooms available, but you've got to be willing to shell out about \$500 a night.

On AirBnB, there are no Gillette properties available during that week.

As far as everyday life goes during the week of Camporee, it will be an inconvenience for residents, with increased traffic, larger crowds at the stores and longer waits at restaurants.

"Some people may not be bothered by extra people in town. Others don't like to spend an extra couple seconds at a stop light," Seders said.

If someone falls into the latter category and had already planned to take a vacation that year, the week of Camporee would be an ideal time to take the time off, she added.

But for those who like interacting with people, it's "a great opportunity to get involved," Seders said. Many of the Pathfinders will be looking for community service projects throughout the week. Coordinating those projects will require a number of volunteers. Those who are interested in helping out can call the visitors center at 307-686-0040.

As big as Camporee is expected to be, it won't even be the biggest event in the region that week. The annual Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, which brings in hundreds of thousands of people every year, takes place from Aug. 2-11, 2024.

Coming and going

The campgrounds won't open before 8 a.m. on Aug. 5, a Monday. The Pathfinders will arrive and load in from 8 a.m. through midnight on Aug. 5, and 8 a.m. through 7:30 pm. Aug. 6.

All on-site and off-site activities start at noon Aug. 6.

The mass exodus of people will take place during the night of Aug. 10, while most of Gillette is fast asleep.



Hunter Tait of California gets ready to get back on the road with his riding partners after a stop at the CBH Co-op gas station across from Cam-plex in Gillette.

Gillette businesses are used to the steady stream of motorcyclists that travel through town each year, to and from Sturgis, South Dakota, but next year that influx of patrons will include an additional 50,000-plus attendees of the International Pathfinder Camporee at Cam-plex.

News Record Photo/Ed Glazar

Some may choose to leave right after 11 p.m. Aug. 10. Most clubs will leave town before noon on Aug. 11, and the campgrounds must be vacated by 2 p.m. on that date.

Although the event is expected to bring in 55,000 people to Gillette, not all of them will be out in the community at the same time.

Camporee also will have buses shuttling people from Cam-plex to different areas of town, whether it's for activities, community service projects or shopping.

Every morning and afternoon, there will be groups of kids going out into the community for various service projects. The first community service session is Tuesday afternoon, and there will be two sessions on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.

Each session will have up to 5,000 kids, Seders said.

Seders recommends buying groceries and gas the week before, and also filling prescriptions ahead of time if possible.

Seders said Monday and Tuesday should be the busiest as far as the Camporee folks going out to buy food, and it's expected to taper off through the week. Camporee will have buses leaving Cam-plex every half hour taking people to go shopping.

Many Pathfinders will stock up on groceries and supplies on their way to Gillette. The Camporee website lists all of Gillette's grocery and hardware stores, as well as the Costco in Billings, Montana, and the Sam's Club in Casper.

Seders said she's also heard from small business owners about Camporee.

"I think their biggest concern is how to be prepared, how much inventory is an appropriate amount? You want to buy enough, but you don't want to buy too much," she said. "What we've been telling our merchants is, buy whatever your budget allows, be happy what extra was sold."

Any merchandise that has the word "Gillette" on it is expected to be popular among the Pathfinders, Seders said. Camping supplies, such as sleeping bags and tents, will be in hot demand, and the Pathfinders also "love" secondhand stores, she added.

Why Gillette?

In 1994, the Camporee was held near the Red Rocks Amphitheater in Morrison, Colorado. That year, there were about 12,200 people.

In 1999, the event moved to Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and it hosted 22,000 people. Since then, its attendance has grown to 32,000, then 42,000, and then more than 50,000. In 2019, there were 55,000 people. That year, the event had an estimated \$25 million economic impact.

So why move it to Gillette?

Camporee officials have said that it was time for a change.

In the fall of 2020, Vern Byrd visited Gillette as a potential location for the International Pathfinder Camporee, and he was impressed.

Camporee Director Ron Whitehead said it seemed too good to be true, so he visited Campbell County to see for himself.

His impression, he said at the time, “was even stronger.”

It would have been much easier to not move. Whitehead has compared it to a golfer playing the same course time after time.

“After a while, they’re tired of going to that same course over and over, they want a new course, a new challenge,” he said at the time.

“And we just felt pressed that this was the right venue.”

Whitehead has said that the way Gillette takes care of its youth really stood out to himself and the other Camporee folks. As the Camporee is largely youth-oriented, they felt that it was a good fit.

In addition to Cam-plex, the Recreation Center, the Energy Capital Sports Complex, Gillette College, Area 59, the parks systems, the hospital and the restaurants also helped sell Gillette.

At any given time from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Aug. 6-9, 2024, there will be about 1,000 Camporee kids, staff and volunteers in the Rec Center.

Camporee will have use of the field house, basketball courts, three racquetball courts, climbing tower, lap pool, leisure pool and the teen locker rooms from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Aug. 6-9, 2024.

These areas will be closed to residents during this time.

The Energy Capital Sports Complex will be closed to the public during these hours, but residents will be able to use the facilities before 8 a.m. and after 5 p.m. on the four days.

Under the agreement, Camporee will pay the city \$5 per day for use of the facilities, for a total of \$20.

What's Gillette's end of the deal?

The contract to host Camporee in 2024 and 2029 brings in \$500,000 in rent to Cam-plex combined between both events. But the incentive to host an event exponentially larger than any the town has hosted before stems from the broader economic impact it's hoped to bring.

When the Camporee first announced its partnership with Gillette and Campbell County in January 2021, officials estimated it would bring economic impact similar to the \$25 million created in Oshkosh in 2019.

To track that impact, the Campbell County Convention and Visitors Bureau has contracted with a company that will provide credit card data and geolocation data. It will allow the visitors center to track general spending and traveling habits during Camporee. The same technology was used during this year's National High School Finals Rodeo.

How much will it cost to host?

Since Camporee and local officials began working together to bring the 2024 event to Gillette, an incalculable amount of time has been spent planning and executing the preparation required to pull it off.

While the exact cost of hosting Camporee is not clear yet, the dollar amount expected to be spent in capital projects and purchases is in the ballpark of \$2.1 million, said Aaron Lyles, Cam-plex executive director.

City and county officials crafted a deal to provide \$1.5 million for Cam-plex to build the amphitheater site at Cam-plex Park that the Pathfinders will use for special activities each night of the event.

That project came in under budget and freed up about \$300,000 which city and county officials are working to grant Cam-plex to spend on other Camporee-related expenses.

The amphitheater site is effectively a leveled grass field, not an amphitheater itself. A temporary amphitheater will be built on that site by Camporee for use during the event but otherwise the site is complete.

Most notably, Cam-plex still needs to build a roadway/walking path that will connect the Camporee campsites and lead through the South Garner Lake Road underpass that leads to the amphitheater site.

There's also gates, security cameras and fences around the perimeter of Cam-plex needed to meet contract requirements, some of which have synergy for use with other Cam-plex events and tenants, Lyles said.

There's also the question of how to practically flow tens of thousands of people from Cam-plex to Cam-plex Park on the other side of the heavily trafficked five-lane road — over and back each night.

“Sixty-thousand people going through that eight-foot underpass underneath the road, it will take hours to move that many people underneath that road,” Lyles said. “It's just not feasible.”



A driver crosses Thursday over a pedestrian tunnel that runs beneath South Garner Lake road and into Cam-plex Park. The county has planned improvements to the crossing ahead of the 2024 International Pathfinder Camporee.

News Record Photo/Ed Glazar

Local officials are still waiting to hear about the status of a \$750,000 Wyoming Outdoor Recreation grant. They hoped to know earlier this year whether Cam-plex would receive that grant, but so far, the state has not announced its recipients.

That money has been planned on covering the remaining Camporee expenses, Lyles said.

There is still \$340,000 carried over in the Cam-plex budget to, if needed, help Camporee supply port-a-potties for the event. If the outdoor recreation grant falls through, that money has been counted on to make up some of the difference.

They want how many port-a-potties?

When the Camporee first agreed to come to Gillette, having enough restrooms for its thousands of attendees was a prime concern. Local officials agreed to set aside \$340,000 to pay for port-a-potties if Camporee was unable to find enough on its own.

After signaling that it would round up enough portable toilets on its own, Camporee officials apparently changed course earlier this summer.

Lyles has said that Camporee expects the \$340,000 to pay for about 700 port-a-potties, but that in his research, it appears more likely to cover 325-340 units.

Since then, Camporee may have changed its tune.

Lyles said there's no guarantee, but that Camporee is now working to take care of the port-a-potty dilemma without the Cam-plex dollars, in which case those funds could cover other Camporee-related expenses for Cam-plex.

“They have regularly said they don’t want to do anything to the community that’s negative,” Lyles said. “They recognize that even though this was the commitment made a couple years ago, if they can identify other solutions, they’re willing to try to work toward that end.”

What’s left to accomplish?

With less than a year until Camporee begins, there are still a number of projects to complete and unknowns to work around.

The status of the looming \$750,000 grant is a major linchpin financially, but with or without it, there still needs to be a road built through the Cam-plex campgrounds connecting to the amphitheater site and a number of small but crucial projects, such as putting up fencing as required by contract and ensuring there’s enough Wi-Fi capability throughout the Cam-plex campus.

When the National High School Finals Rodeo visited in July, the number of people at Cam-plex caused poor and spotty cell service for many visitors. Lyles said that Cam-plex employees had to communicate exclusively with walkie-talkies because of the issue. Without changes, that problem figures to remain when even more people flood in for Camporee.

Then there’s the old saying that often applies when trying something for the first time: You don’t know what you don’t know.

“It would be a fool’s errand on my part to say that there aren’t going to be some serious problems to come,” Lyles said. “It’s (the) logistics of 60,000 people being on site.”

David King, Campbell County Emergency Management Coordinator, said Camporee will have its own emergency service personnel at Cam-plex during the week of the event, and some of those folks will be in Gillette Sept. 11 for a site visit.

Although local law enforcement and EMS are preparing for Camporee, King said a lot of people at the state level still don't know about the event.

On Sept. 12, Camporee will brief state agencies, including the state Department of Homeland Security, on the event.

"The state wants to plan for this along the lines of planning that was done for the eclipse," he said.

The 2017 total solar eclipse saw about 260,000 people traveling in Wyoming, including 192,000 who came from out of state, according to an economic analysis that was done for the Wyoming Office of Tourism.

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