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FEATURED

TOP STORY

Cam-plex works through logistics as Camporee draws near

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A view of the amphitheater site in the southeast corner of Cam-plex Park in Gillette where International Pathfinder Camporee workers and volunteers will set up a stage and host nightly performances during the event.

Ed Glazar

It's been more than three years since the International Pathfinder Camporee announced it was coming to Gillette Aug. 5-11, 2024.

There has been a lot of turnover in the local leadership since that January 2021 announcement. Cam-plex has had two directors — three if you count the interim director — and Gillette has had three mayors. And four of the five current Campbell County Commissioners were not on the board back then.

Now, there are 140 days until the event comes to town.

During a Campbell County Chamber of Commerce luncheon last week, Pastor Ron Whitehead, Camporee director, said it can be difficult to get through changes in leadership, but that his experience with the leaders of Campbell County, despite the turnover, has been “outstanding.”

Aaron Lyles, executive director of Cam-plex, was hired about a year and a half after Camporee announced it was coming, and he’s now been there for a year and a half. And with less than five months left, he and his staff are busy working through the logistics and final infrastructure pieces for the event that will bring in close to 60,000 people to Gillette.

In late March, an executive committee within the Camporee organization will vote on the final operations plan for the event. Once that’s approved, the finishing touches can be put on the critical infrastructure pieces that, while not major, are still essential to the event.

Cam-plex has four shower houses on its grounds. Camporee will bring in 14 more. Lyles is waiting to see where those 14 shower houses will be located. Some of them will have access to existing water lines, but others will be in places that don’t have access, and new water lines will have to be installed, along with collection tanks for gray water.

Lyles said this work should take between three and four days to complete.

There also is some final electrical work that still needs to be done at the amphitheater site at Cam-plex Park. All of the major components are in place, Lyles said, but a few more things need to be put in before it’s all good to go.

In and out

There will be a slight overlap with the Campbell County Fair, which this year starts on July 19 and ends with the youth livestock sale on July 28.

Cam-plex's contract with Camporee begins on July 29. Lyles said Camporee is aware that it might take a couple of days for all of the teardown work for the fair to finish.

"We'll be getting pig manure out of Central Pavilion the same day they (Camporee) are moving onto the grounds," Lyles said.

It won't be an easy task.

"It'll be a tough push for our staff to make this transition, because the contract requires all animal manure, dander and hair has to be out," he said. "That's a steep ask when it comes to horse stalls."

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.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has 13 divisions around the world. Each division is broken down into unions, based on geography. Each union in the North American Division will have its own campground at Cam-plex, as well as its own gate and entrance from the road, so that clubs aren't having to drive through other campgrounds.

Last year, Cam-plex had one point of entrance for all 1,796 contestants in the National High School Finals Rodeo. With Camporee, each campground has its own entrance, so "we're anticipating it won't be as backlogged as it has been in the past," Lyles said.

Pathfinders will be traveling with their clubs in groups of dozens, and they'll know ahead of time where in Cam-plex they'll be staying. About 40,000 will arrive on Monday, Aug. 5, and the remaining 15,000 to 20,000

will get there Tuesday. Between 4,000 and 5,000 volunteers will arrive the week before.

Vehicles that are parked in the campgrounds must remain there for the duration of Camporee. However, the paved parking, such as the parking lots for the Wyoming Center, Energy Hall and the Heritage Center, will be used for day-use parking so volunteers can drive into town whenever they need to.

“Parking cars is going to be as much of a challenge as finding spaces for all the tent camping,” Lyles said. “But they do have significantly more space here than they did in Wisconsin.”

Historically, most of the clubs will leave the event the night after the final program, and “by the time you get home from church,” Cam-plex will be 98% empty, Whitehead said.

While this is what’s happened at past Camporees, Lyles said he won’t be surprised if this year’s Camporee exodus isn’t as quick.

OshKosh was much closer to large cities than Gillette is, so it was easier for Pathfinders to get home, Lyles said. Plus, quite a few Pathfinders might take the opportunity to do some sightseeing, so they won’t be in as much of a hurry to leave Wyoming as they were to leave Wisconsin.

“I’d imagine we’ll have a little slower exit than they’re used to,” Lyles said.

Finding help

For Campbell County Public Works Director Matt Olsen, he’s not as actively involved now as earlier in the process when the site for the amphitheater at Cam-plex Park was being built. That empty field has turned out great.

“We couldn’t have planted that grass in any better year, with how much rain we got last year, it was perfect to get that grass growing and get some good roots,” Olsen said.

Now, Olsen is waiting to see what happens during the event. County facilities like the Rockpile Museum and especially the Recreation Center will see heavy use, and he has to make sure his custodial staff can handle the increase.

If needed, Olsen has the ability to contract with local companies to provide support, but for now, he's planning to make things work with the people he has.

Lyles will need to hire additional people to help with Cam-plex's current custodial staff. Right now he has eight event custodians, but he plans to hire three to six more people to keep up.

And with more people, there will be more trash. On an average day, the North Landfill gets 170 tons of trash. Olsen said he's been told to expect an additional 200 tons for the week of Camporee, which doesn't worry him.

"The increased tonnages we'll see are well within our capacity of what we can handle," he said.

Cellphone service on Cam-plex's side of town can be sketchy, so Lyles is working with Verizon to put in a temporary cell tower on the infield of Morningside Park.

And Camporee usually ends with a big fireworks display, but Campbell County is typically under some type of fire ban in August due to the dry conditions, so the Campbell County Fire Department is keeping a close eye on the situation, Lyles said.

Campbell County isn't having to go through this alone. The state has been "an incredible partner in this process," Lyles said, bringing together many state agencies, as well as the National Guard, for monthly meetings.

"It's refreshing that we have this much support," he said.

Once Camporee's operations plan is finalized, Cam-plex will start reaching out to the nearby neighborhoods and let them know what to expect as far as the effects the Camporee will have on their daily lives for that week.

"We know there's going to be frustrations," Lyles said. "The impacts will be real and not always easy to manage."

Whitehead said that when Camporee volunteers have visited the community, they're always blown away, not just by the facilities and infrastructure, but by the people as well.

"The friendliness, the way you invest in your young people and your seniors, it's very intentional, I could go on and on about this community and why I think it's extra special," he said.

Brenda Brandy, the honors coordinator for Camporee, said getting to attend this event is a privilege for the Pathfinders. They have to raise hundreds of dollars and travel hundreds or thousands of miles to get here, and they won't take it for granted.

"We've been telling all of our people, you're going to have so much fun in Wyoming, because this is a family-oriented state," she said. "Every time I come here I go out into the community ... you guys are nice. You guys are really nice."

Jonathan Gallardo