

ECLIPSE CENTRAL

HOW CARBONDALE, ILLINOIS, PREPPED FOR THE TOTAL SOLAR ECLIPSE

On August 21, 2017, a total solar eclipse passed across the continental United States for the first time since 1918. Its 70-mile wide path bisected 14 states and gave the 25 million people who live within a day's drive of totality an opportunity to witness a rarity, while also allowing them to participate in perhaps one of the worst traffic days in U.S. history.

While some people prepared for the worst, others rejoiced in the opportunity to host visitors and to capitalize on the opportunity to welcome eclipse chasers.

We in Carbondale, Illinois, had the unique advantage of being the point of longest duration of totality of the 2017 eclipse. Carbondale also has the unique title of being the “eclipse crossroads,” as another total eclipse in 2024 will also pass over the city.

Two years before the eclipse, astronomers and physicists from our own Southern Illinois University (SIU) tried to convince us that tens of thousands of people, perhaps more, would flock to our town of 26,000 population to witness 2 minutes and 41.6 seconds of darkness not normally present on a hot Monday afternoon in August.

We listened, we learned, and we quickly realized that we had better be prepared.

Unlike larger cities in the path of the eclipse, including Portland, Oregon; Kansas City, Missouri; and Nashville, Tennessee, Carbondale is not accustomed to hosting 50,000 people for a special event. Nor are we accustomed to receiving so much attention.

Tremendous Undertaking

Although the thought of welcoming so many visitors was intriguing and exciting, it was equally daunting, as we knew we had little control over the number of people that would surely want to converge and claim a viewing spot at eclipse central.

We decided to take action, form a

planning committee, and embrace what we believed to be the only time in the city's history when it had a competitive advantage over everyone else. The two-year process was a tremendous undertaking that involved a lot of work, a lot of uncertainty, and a lot of questions.

Now that the eclipse is over, I can confidently say that our community was ready, and we're looking forward to April 8, 2024, to host another one. Having done it once, we learned these valuable lessons that will guide us through the next seven years and hopefully assist others when planning big events:

Get everyone on the bus. Anyone who has been in a leadership role surely understands the value of getting the right team assembled. As important as it is in managing daily operations, it's amplified when the population triples over a weekend.

Throw in a three-day festival, which the city decided to support to help celebrate the event, and staff members will be unable to handle everything. We realized this right away, and knew we had to involve the entire community in the events.

Carbondale's main street organization, tourism bureau, faith community, nonprofits, civic clubs, and hundreds of resident volunteers all played a part in developing and executing the plan of action.



CENTRAL

By Gary Williams

Since this was going to be the biggest event Carbondale had managed, we more than doubled the number of volunteers typically used for busy weekends like SIU's homecoming and graduation. Every level of the organization was involved to ensure there was an adequate number of personnel and that we were communicating our plan clearly to everyone.

Our vision for the eclipse event was reinforced by engaging teams weekly. The sense of teamwork was enhanced by accepting feedback from anyone who had an idea to share. In the end, valuing the input of every teammate, regardless of their rank in the hierarchy, helped get everyone on the bus and moving in the same direction.

Keep it simple. We all know the acronym K-I-S-S. The principle of simplifying an action plan couldn't be more relevant than when you know there are going to be a lot of moving parts to it.

Although we tried to prepare for the worst, we were careful not to complicate the existing plan. We tried to stick to the basics of what communities are comfortable managing: safety, logistics, communications, and customer service. This meant making people feel safe, providing convenient parking, making sure bathrooms were available, developing clear signage, and having people available to answer questions.

There were certainly more details to



consider, but keeping our plan simple ensured that team members stayed focused when things went wrong, which we knew they would.

Make sure people are comfortable.

Carbondale's civic center remained open all weekend, and I was amazed at how many visitors were surprised by this, but they were also glad that we did keep it open. August in southern Illinois is typically hot and humid, and the easiest way to discourage visitors from returning is to make them uncomfortable.

The civic center provided a welcome refuge to visitors who were greeted with bottles of water provided by volunteers. A key part of our plan also was to provide shuttles to move people around town more efficiently, reducing the stress of driving in an unfamiliar place.

We set up cooling tents and misting stations in various locations to help people cool off. In spite of the long hours, we also kept smiling, which assured our guests that they were in good hands.

Roll out the red carpet. Providing good hospitality doesn't have to exist only in the South, and there's no reason that your team can't provide a great experience, regardless of what region you're in.

To put our best foot forward, a major capital project in the heart of downtown was accelerated and finished. In May 2017, we began replacing all public sidewalks on a half-mile stretch of downtown. We also relocated overhead utility lines, planted new trees, and constructed new planters so that the best first impression possible could be made.

To mitigate the risk of potentially having the project unfinished, the contractor was required to include all overtime in their price. The city received a lot of additional tender loving care during the weeks leading up to the eclipse, as we repainted street lights, replaced flags, restriped pavement markings, and installed new plantings.

In the days before the eclipse took place, teams of volunteers met incoming visitors at the train station to welcome them. As downtown restaurants filled and lines of customers spilled onto the streets, bottles of water were delivered to them while they waited.

Again, workers and volunteers made sure they always had smiles on their faces and thanked everyone for visiting. For small towns off the beaten path, it can be hard to convince people to visit at all. A big event might give people reasons

to visit once, but it's up to a community to give them reasons to come back.

Play to play great. From reading the book *The Golfer's Mind: Play to Play Great* by author Bob Rotella, and through his insights on human performance and specifically in professional sports, I was amazed to learn that some of the greatest athletes in the world sometimes feared winning and attributed losses to their fear of accepting praise or the spotlight.

They actually sabotaged themselves because they wanted to avoid victory and thus, the attention that would follow. I certainly understand this rationale and perhaps like many of my peers, prefer to be behind the scenes and leave the public spotlight to elected officials.

I'm also reminded of something I often tell staff members: "It's not about me." If your community is as lucky as

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we were and have something special happen that can put it on the map, try to remember that it isn't about you as the manager, it's about your charge to your community.

It's imperative that you do everything you can to leverage the situation. Jump out of your comfort zone and seize the opportunity.

During eclipse weekend, we were interviewed by every major print and TV outlet in the country, which provided publicity that we never could have afforded to generate on our own. We welcomed more than 50,000 visitors. We knew that this was a moment where failure wasn't an option.

Lessons learned. The biggest change we would make is to try and calm the media. In the weeks leading up to the eclipse, there was a consider-

able number of local media reports on impending traffic nightmares and warnings that our communities would be overrun with tourists.

All of us feel that these types of stories had an effect on local residents who by and large stayed home during the eclipse weekend. In 2024, we'll give more effort to sending a relaxed message to the media in hopes that we can calm tensions that will precede the event.

In spite of any reservations or nervousness that we may have had in the beginning, we made a decision to embrace the spotlight. We assured ourselves that we could handle the situation as well as anyone. We made the decision to not just play, but to play great. From my vantage point, we were successful. **PM**



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