

The Independence City

INDEPENDENT

City Plays Starring Role in Successful Eclipse Event

By Anne Scheck

Independence shone like a supernova during “Indy Goes Dark.” But whether it will help turn the town into a tourism star remains to be seen.

Interviews with local residents showed they were over the moon about Independence’s performance during the event. However, some out-of-town visitors – while giving the town high marks for friendliness and good planning – nonetheless considered the festivities less than stellar.

“I give it a grade of about a ‘B’,” said James Hillary, who traveled from Portland to spend the weekend at “Camp Indy.” Accommodations there were “kind of rough,” he said. The small parking spot had no shade and fire pits weren’t allowed, he explained. Then, on his way into Riverview Park, he was solicited for a donation – right before he needed to drop dollar after dollar so his kids could use the “bouncy house.”

In the craft-brewers’ tent, Frank Kauffman, who drove in from Spokane, had a similar reaction. He gave the event a “C” grade, he said. Like Mr. Hillary, he found local

residents and city staffers both cordial and helpful. However, he said at least one activity was “overstated.”

Picking up a copy of “Oregon Beer Growler” lying on a table, he thumbed through to page 6, which featured a brief article indicating that Independence was anticipating “approximately 40 breweries and cideries to participate.” Looking around, Mr. Kauffman noted the number that were represented came to less than half of that tally.

The Ayers family from Salem – father David, mother E.J, and their adult children, sisters Gillian and Natalie -- said they expected more food and drink options. They gave the event a cumulative grade-point average of “B.” However, they agreed they were having fun under the soon-to-disappear sun. “This should really be about people coming together anyway,” said Ms. Ayers.

However, Independence came up aces in the view of local residents. I give it an A-plus,” said Aysia Edmiston, who recently graduated with a nursing degree from the OHSU

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Nursing program at Western Oregon University.

Ditto for Independence residents Chelsea Gregus and Eric Alvarez. Both also assigned “Indy Goes Dark” a grade of “A.” Mr. Alvarez, who is nearly a lifelong citizen of the city, said he loved “the wide variety” of activities, from the juggler who explained the physics of the balls being tossed in the air to the musical acts that also took the stage in the Riverview Park amphitheater.

Maria Gonzalez, who graduated from Central High School in the 1980s and now is a Portland hair stylist, said she returned to her old stomping grounds to celebrate the eclipse. “I cannot believe how much better things are,” she said.

“All we had for entertainment back then was a bowling alley. Now there is a movie theater.” Told the bowling alley is no longer operating, Ms. Gonzalez said she thinks the movie theater is a far more important acquisition. “I don’t think that bowling alley will be missed by today’s teenagers,” she said.

City officials appeared to be hoping that the town’s draw for the eclipse might grow its visibility as a desired tourist destination.

But if history is any guide, in-state visitors need to be impressed before a larger customer base can be attracted to spend significant money and substantial time in a small-town location. In a study now considered a landmark survey, which was published nearly two decades ago in *Social Science*, visitors at three small towns

in Texas were asked to identify the factors that helped them make the decision to travel to a different part of the lone star state. One town was known for its artists’ colony, another featured hand-made crafts and a third offered sunny, summertime beaches – all these offerings proved to be a magnet for visits.

Then the researchers dug into which tourists would return -- and why. That turned out largely to be due to whether the town was a relatively short travel distance and if it was one with friends or family nearby.

Three years ago, a Canadian team collected results from different reports on tourism and concluded that proximity does play a role, but not in situations where high tourism would occur anyway, such as historic sites or exotic locations. However, another reason showed significant influence.

Big events helped create tourist destinations, regardless of scenic settings or quaint shopping. In contrast to local events – such as resident-oriented festivals, like those that celebrate a harvest crop or a town anniversary – big events, like “Indy Goes Dark,” can raise a tourism profile like nothing else does, according to the results, which appeared in the journal of *Tourism Management*.

The eclipse drew tourists to Independence by the droves -- make that the *thousands* -- mostly from up and down the west coast and into Canada, but from places like London and Mumbai, too.

A lot passed by Kate Schwarzler. Or rather, they passed by the

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Independence Opera House, where Ms. Schwarzler watched them from the wall of windows at the front of *Indy Commons*, the business she founded five months ago, which occupies half of the historic building.

"They looked like they were exploring," she said, noting that the place these arrivals were scouting was her adopted home town. Some spied the huge, eye-catching map of the City of Independence in *Indy Commons*, then came in to ask questions.

Others were hunting for ice cream, and they were directed down the street to *The Golden Horse Restaurant*. Some carried pastry from the *Ovenbird Bakery* and many were wearing tee shirts with logos of the eclipse.

A couple of them wanted a quiet space and place to catch up on business. "We sold a day pass or two," she said, adding that she did almost no marketing for the \$10-per-day spots at *Indy Commons*, a shared work-space facility where several professional entrepreneurs now hang their hat, ranging from a tax attorney to a financial planner.

"It was great to see the vibrancy this brought," including a guitar-strumming street musician right outside her door, said Ms. Schwarzler.

In fact, as the four-day period wore on, she witnessed evidence of the same growth the city crowd forecasters predicted: The throng grew to 7,000 visitors by Saturday night, according to Shawn Irvine, Independence economic development director. Still, it never grew to the influx the city had predicted.

That was fine with Ms. Schwarzler. "I would rather have planned for more people and have been prepared," she said. That sentiment was echoed up and down Main Street, including by Katie Schaub, owner of the *Ovenbird Bakery*, who had feared a customer pile-up would render the staff there unable to accommodate the catering needs for other August events, including weddings.

"It was just so great to have people come together in this common thread and just see everyone, young or old, get so caught up in it," Ms. Schwarzler said. Gregory Peterson, proprietor of Independence Grill & Bar, said he felt the eclipse had been too heavily hyped, prompting him to over-stock on food. Still, he was happy with "the way the city managed things," he said. "They did a good job."

Earlier this year, Mr. Peterson and a handful of other merchants had lamented their lack of inclusion as vendors at Riverview Park during the event, at a meeting with city officials. Because a city contract previously was awarded to another restaurateur, the food-and-drink stands were largely non-local. However, Mr. Peterson was able to sell breakfast burritos in the park on the morning of the eclipse.


"We sold out of those," he said. The experience taught him that "I have to be a participant" in any downtown planning process, he said. "I cannot stand in the back of the room and shout. I have to get inside the circle."



The CIVICS LESSON: *When Floods Formed A Form Of Government*

As the flood waters in Houston begin to recede, the devastation there is being compared to the deadly flood of 1900 in another Texas city, Galveston. Both cities suffered the worst American hurricanes ever on record. But Galveston's aftermath had a lingering effect across the country on city government, including the governing structure of towns in Oregon. After the ruinous Galveston flood, a new form of city government arose so that elected officials and city-hired engineers could work in tandem. This "Galveston Plan" involved at-large voting for a non-partisan panel of "commissioners" and gave them the authority to help run the city in conjunction with municipal staff – a precursor to the council-manager style of city government that exists today in Independence. Typically, a chair or mayor helms a commission or council, with a city manager who oversees city staff, and both sides influence and balance each other. (*Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*).

The INDY HOP: *The Great Eclipse Hunt for Zombies, Wink! Wink!*

As the moon blocks the sun in a total eclipse, zombies come out ... To play? Drink craft beer? Wander Riverview Park? A couple of visitors to Independence were making that claim shortly before the total eclipse, and news of this worried Independence Police Chief Robert Mason (okay, not really, but he played along). He said his "zombie patrol," which was really just Independence police officers on regular duty, had turned up nothing once the eclipse was complete. But wait! Might it have been because, to detect zombies, it's necessary to look them in the eye to see their blank, unfocused stare? True, he acknowledged. "And everyone was wearing those glasses, looking up at the sky," the chief explained. That very reason was also cited by Polk County Sheriff Mark Garton, who missed spotting any. "I had my eclipse glasses on and you can't see anything but the sun in those things," he stated with mock seriousness. But he thinks they never made it to the event. "My guess is that they didn't even have enough time to get out of the ground during the eclipse," he said, adding that "from what I have seen on TV, most of them are pretty slow." Independence resident Judi West, who was walking to the post office after the eclipse, said she felt safe just knowing law enforcement had been on the lookout for zombies, "even though they don't exist." But, as the organizer of the annual area-wide garage sale at the Independence Airpark, Ms. West noted that real, live people can seem to turn into zombies -- for a while -- when they zero in on a project. Chief Mason agreed. "The city staff worked really hard during this (eclipse) event," he said. "By the end, I think you could say some were so tired they became like zombies." --AS

GUEST EDITORIAL
By Shawn Irvine
Economic Development Director
City of Independence

It takes a wide range of efforts from all sectors of the community to create a vibrant downtown environment. The key is to have everyone working toward a similar goal. I think that is where Independence has found success.

As many readers of *The Independent* know -- and as much of the broader Independence resident base is aware -- two decades ago it was a very different kind of downtown experience and economy. Not having experienced it myself, it still surprises me to hear from people who were afraid to go downtown then.

Over the last twenty years, the City has created a number of programs, projects and partnerships to revitalize the downtown. A partnership brought the MERIT microenterprise development program to Independence about five years ago. Several MERIT graduates now dot downtown Independence and Monmouth, including Ovenbird Bakery and Ladies of Liberty, and city loan funds have helped businesses like the Ash Creek Animal Clinic and Starduster Cafe get on their feet.

City facade grants and infrastructure projects have improved the look and appeal of the built environment downtown. Other projects, like construction of the amphitheater, development of a downtown library, or creation of a concert series, were designed to bring people (potential customers) downtown. The City played a role of varying degrees in all of this under the leadership of Mayor McArdle and a very stable city council.

The City can prepare the ground and plant the seeds, but it's the businesses and community that ultimately determine whether the downtown grows. Business owners must be willing to take a risk and open a store or restaurant. In order to do that, they need to feel supported -- not just by the city in terms of regulations and bureaucracy, but also by the community members who will be customers.

A lively downtown is a place that the community and businesses are proud of and freely promote to their friends and customers. The community's two farmer's markets were a great example of the synergy that can be created in an exciting downtown. They send customers to each other and recommend other things to do in the community, adding value to the customer's experience and enhancing the overall perception of downtown.

Other businesses do this too - one restaurant is an outlier, but three or four becomes an entertainment district, especially when the servers are telling customers about all the other great things to do in the downtown. When businesses collaborate, like with the

"Going Dark" pub tour a couple years ago, or create their own events like Crossfit Kiowa's workout fundraiser, we begin to achieve the vibrancy that says "there's always something happening downtown."

Customers play an important role in all of this. Word of mouth conversations are the best advertising. A great downtown is a place that people want to go meet friends or hang out. To preserve businesses, money has to be spent there.

A previous article in *The Independent*, July 2017 "Capturing Customers: Downtown Does It Differently," was a good summary but it was not complete. Even five years ago it was easy to find a parking space downtown. Today we are exploring how to deal with a very real parking problem. Independence is a great small town, and will grow even more once Independence Landing is completed.

Downtown Independence is becoming the hub of the community envisioned by the City in the 1996 Downtown Development Plan, a regional magnet for visitors, business relocations/start-ups, business expansions, family relocations and more.

It has happened through a concerted effort and the willingness of everyone to "buy in" to the vision of what downtown could be, and work together to achieve it. We still have a long way to go, but it's fun to see the progress that's been made. Again, critical to this success has been the vision and leadership provided by a long-serving Mayor and council, a community supportive of innovation and investment, and customers who make return trips to our exciting downtown.