

Mesa Freedom Celebration a big hit, Mayor says

by **Art Thomason** - Jul. 6, 2010 02:28 PM
The Arizona Republic

As inaugurals go, it was one of Mesa's most explosive.

The energy started building 24 hours before real fireworks filled the air.

"I'm so excited, I'm giddy," Mayor Scott Smith said after walking downtown Mesa's streets among thousands of revelers converging on the city's Celebration of Freedom.

"We had over 450 volunteers, over 50 sponsoring companies," he said. "This is fun."

The festivities, attracting one of the largest Friday night crowds in memory, were a mere warm-up for Saturday night.

"Saturday was out of this world," said Omar de la Cruz, owner of three downtown restaurants. "You could barely walk down Main Street it was so crowded. All the businesses were just hopping. Everybody had lines out the door. It was great."

Before fireworks began rocketing toward the skies from their launching pads atop the arts center and Mesa City Hall, Smith and Gov. Jan Brewer stood on a stage straddling the westbound lanes of Main Street.

"I looked west and could not see the end of people," he said. "It was unbelievable. They were shoulder to shoulder."

The total crowd estimate for both nights was 50,000, a huge number considering struggles over the years to lure people downtown and its image of having little life after dark.

Despite the throngs interacting in temperatures hovering in the 90s, there were no incidents that required intervention by police, said Sgt. Ed Wessing, a Police Department spokesman.

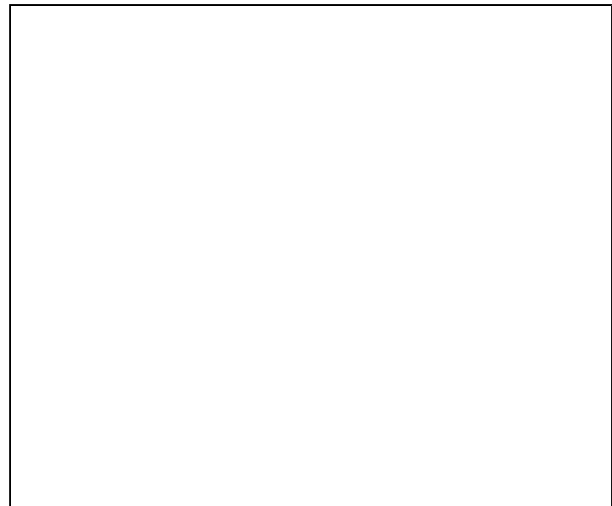
"There were a couple of people selling things without a permit and a couple of lost kids," he said. "But there were no major issues."

The city's committee of planners and sponsors paid for additional off-duty officers, Wessing said.

Police and firefighters walked and rode bicycles up and down the blocked streets, the firefighters carrying equipment for medical emergencies.

"We have gear for just about every type of emergency, from cardiac arrest to diabetic problems," Fire Department Capt. Eric Tipton said.

Advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

Victory of Mesa was among scores of vendors marketing their products along the streets to crowds not normally seen in businesses in the lackluster economy.

The celebration's Freedom signature was everywhere, from photos of Mesa's fallen warriors who died to defend it to the strains of the Symphony of the Southwest's performance of Aaron Copland's Lincoln Portrait in the arts center's Ikeda Theatre.

"That from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion," Mesa Councilman Kyle Jones said as he stood on stage near the orchestra and recited part of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address with the performance.

After the concert, he stood in the spacious hallway outside the 1,600-seat theater and smiled as he surveyed the crowds gathering around downtown Mesa's centerpiece.

The celebration's success is not being taken for granted.

Planners and sponsors plan to assess the celebration that covered the heart of the historic business district's square mile and start mapping plans for next's year's gala that will be on the weekend before the Fourth, Smith said.

"We've already got ideas about things we can do better such as tightening programs and improving some of the staging," he said.

There were few complaints for a festival that ran out of space, the mayor said.

"We had to turn some of the classic cars away," Smith said.

"When you think that this was put together in a little more than six months, quite a short time to plan an undertaking that massive with so many sponsors and volunteers, it was pretty incredible," he said.

One of the reasons for the success was the piggybacking on existing downtown events such as Motorcycles on Main and classic-car exhibitions that draw people to the business district.

"We purposely stayed away from holding the event on the Fourth to avoid competing with other celebrations on the holiday," he said.

Copyright © 2010, azcentral.com. All rights reserved. Users of this site agree to the [Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy/Your California Privacy Rights](#)

Advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™