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Res Run amid COVID challenges Chamber to find ways to bolster budget

By Lou Fancher

It's time to tighten your laces and participate in the 2021 Lafayette Res Run for Education. The annual event co-sponsored by the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce and the city of Lafayette challenges runners on Oct. 24 to scamper and stride in-person through their choice of a 5k Certified Run (8 a.m.), 10k Certified Run (8:15 a.m.), or 2-mile run/walk (8:45 a.m.). A Reservoir Challenge race that premiered during last year's all-virtual event returns, with racers using an app to engage and compete as they run around the 2.7-mile paved trail of the Lafayette Reservoir at a day and time of their choice between Oct. 13th and 23rd.

"We had all four courses last year, but you had to do it all on your own," says Chamber Executive Director Jay Lifson. "You could race against other participants' times by signing up and running the 2 or 5 or 10K or picking your own course. All the times were posted on the app so you could compare and record your times. The challenge was the most popular by far."

In 2019, Lifson said history was made with the highest-ever participation of nearly 2,300 racers. Last year's virtual event during the first summer after the pandemic that restricted large in-person gatherings topped out at 1,650 with 675 of the total number of racers registered for the challenge. One month prior to the 2021 event and with 726 registrants (as of Sept. 20), chamber staff anticipate over 2,000 runners this season.

"The Challenge - we think - will have less people running virtually in 2021 because running together is more fun. Most participants will pick their usual races and overall numbers will increase," Lifson predicts.

Despite last year's lower numbers, the fiscal bottom line improved. The event helps raise money for schools and PTAs, and Lifson said they "learned that the schools were competitive and really got behind it to back it. Also, because families organized and could run together, and roads weren't closed and the event ran on the sidewalks, we saved expenses. People were willing to do it on the sidewalks and stay separated in their own bubbles to be safe."

Importantly, the chamber and city did not have to pay for police services or for the public works department to close the streets. "It saved about \$15,000 dollars and even without as many runners, we ended up with the highest bottom line revenue we've ever had," Lifson said.

Even so, COVID has taken a toll on the chamber, as it has on other nonprofit organizations in Lafayette and communities worldwide. Canceling the Lafayette Art & Wine Festival due to safety concerns was a big blow. "That one event represents over half of our annual budget. By missing it for two consecutive years, it has put tremendous pressures on us. We had good reserves and are spending on those and haven't missed a beat yet. I know we'll be able to do that for a third year and we'll find ways to continue to make money for the chamber and for our local beneficiaries as well."

Making it easier to produce safe community events in the fall and beyond is work completed six years ago - well before the pandemic was even a thought in the minds of anyone. "We took a hard look then at all of our events and all of their safety and security procedures," Lifson said. "Then, it had to do with domestic terrorist activities in the country. We started using K-rails, those big orange walls filled with water, put into place to stop vehicles from running into festival events. We beefed safety up and security presence totally. The plan we have this year with the police department and the first-aid people at the start and finish lines of the reservoir run will be the same. Nothing will increase in terms of protections, other than required COVID measures."

With the Delta variant continuing and lacking a surefire way to protect everyone attending events, the chamber has had to forgo producing this fall's annual Trick or Treat Street and Thanksgiving Community Breakfast. Lifson says there is still hope that the Dec. 5 "It's A Wonderful Life in Lafayette" celebration will be held. Asked if the chamber is developing alternatives, Lifson answers positively and says, "I'm getting ready to announce a new event this year. On Nov. 5, we're going to be offering a smaller version of the Lafayette Art & Wine Festival. It will be a ticketed event for about 130 people. There'll be art, food and beverages. People will have to be vaccinated and wear masks when not eating or drinking."

The chamber is also organizing a focus group of local retailers to provide input to city council about a Yiftee gift card under consideration. Lifson says the group's ideas about maximizing the benefit to Lafayette businesses and nonprofits will be the main feedback provided to council members as they examine the topic in upcoming meetings.

For information about the Lafayette Res Run for Education, visit <https://lafayettechamber.org/resrun/>

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