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City prepares for air race crowds

Last year's noise, traffic addressed, safety officials say

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CORONADO – Coronado is getting ready for the upcoming Red Bull Air Race, where daredevil pilots in lightweight racing planes fly at speeds exceeding 248 miles per hour over San Diego Bay.

While public safety officials are preparing for the crowds, noise and complaints, some residents are preparing for the party.

But at least one event – a chili cook-off – had to be rescheduled, and city officials froze all reservations at Coronado's bayfront parks during race weekend.

Officially part of San Diego Fleet Week 2008, air race activities will begin at 1 p.m. Saturday after the annual Port of San Diego Sea & Air Parade at 11 a.m. with Navy ships and planes.

This is the race's second visit to San Diego since it began in 2003. Its extreme slalom course is set up between the downtown San Diego skyline and Coronado's shore.

Last year, many Coronado residents heard nothing about the race until planes began buzzing around the bay. Some called the city and the Port of San Diego, the event host, to complain about the noise, trash left behind and a support helicopter that followed the planes while filming them.

This year, city officials said those problems have been resolved. The city contacted the state Department of Transportation, which manages bridge traffic, to make sure a concrete barrier is moved to create three lanes leaving Coronado when the event is over. Last year, the barrier was not moved, resulting in heavy traffic on the San Diego-Coronado Bridge and in Coronado.

Public safety officials also made sure that helicopter pilots follow a Federal Aviation Administration requirement prohibiting them from flying within 500 feet of the shoreline. Some thought the helicopter flew too low and hovered too long, though Red Bull officials said they followed the requirement last year.

Coronado Fire Chief Kim Raddatz said Coronado will add resources, including city staff to clean up and police officers for security.

San Diego's stop is the second of a 10-race season. Last year's San Diego race, held in September, drew about 50,000 spectators.

Upon learning of the event's return, recreation officials stopped accepting reservations at all bayfront parks for next weekend, but not before the Coronado Junior Women's Club planned its annual chili cook-off.

“The size of the race event would have dwarfed ours, so we moved it (to May 31),” said Councilwoman Carrie Downey, a club member.

Linda Rahn, Coronado recreation services director, said a couple who rented nearby Centennial Park last year for their wedding carried on with plans on race day despite warnings from city officials.

“We told her, 'It's going to be a zoo,' and she said, 'I know, I know, I know,' ” Rahn said. “But it was set at that point. She went with it.”

Raddatz said residents will hear planes as early as Wednesday as pilots practice the course.

People will be able to see the event free along the bay.

Mary and Will Trafton, who live on First Street next to Centennial Park, invited friends over.

“My invitations went out last week,” Mary Trafton said. “I’m expecting about 30 people.”

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