



BRINGING BACK THE FUN FESTIVALS AND EVENTS RETURN TO KANSAS CITIES

By Megan Gilliland, Communications and Education Manager, League of Kansas Municipalities

In 2020, nearly every city-sponsored festival, event, and celebration was cancelled. COVID-19 public health protocols called for limited contact with others. Any large gathering of people became collateral damage in the fight against the spread of COVID-19. This year, as vaccination rates increase and as people have become comfortable with public events once again, cities are now tasked with bringing back those events and gatherings that people crave and seek out to feel “normal” again.

The June Jaunt is a regional event held in the cities along K-96 from Great Bend to Tribune (including Leoti, Ness City, and Scott City). Each year, different cities plan special events for their communities and visitors to showcase their city’s unique attributes, arts, attractions, and cultural events. All the cities coordinate the marketing for the June Jaunt and promote their city’s attractions through a main website and Facebook event.

“This is the 10th anniversary of the June Jaunt,” said Christina Hayes, CVB Director and Community Coordinator for the City of Great Bend. “The 2020 event was cancelled but this year we’re back and we set up the event and attractions to include social distancing. We have added hand washing and sanitizer stations, and we will pre-bag the popcorn we give out for our movie in the park event so that we can ensure that food is handled in a sanitary method when we package it.”

For the June Jaunt, as with many other cities, Great Bend is limiting the number of vendors and spacing vendors out more than previous years to provide some distance during the 2021 events.

Hayes also commented that they will do inflatables for kids this year, but they are focused on offering inflatables that have more open-air environments.

“We have a giant Twister game board this year,” Hayes said. “We’re trying to give people some options. This year we will have our annual cruise night, baseball tournament, outdoor movie in the park, and a beer garden.”



PHOTOS FROM THE 2021 JUNE JAUNT IN GREAT BEND.
PHOTO CREDITS: ALEX MOYERS

Wamego held their annual Tulip Festival in Wamego City Park on April 17 and 18. The organizers employed additional hand sanitizer and wider paths to promote health and safety during the festival. The arts and crafts vendors at the event were incredibly pleased with the turn-out.

“It was good for not only us, but also the City of Wamego, to bring back festivals like this for the community,” said one of the event vendors. “It gives us a chance to showcase some of our arts and crafts, along with the chance for Wamego to showcase all the positive aspects of the City.”

Another vendor commented, “It feels good to see families coming from all over the state to experience an event like this. The blooming tulips, live music, and local arts and crafts create a fun and vibrant experience for those within the community and those visiting from out of town.”

“The event was a huge success,” said Kara Holle, the Interim Executive Director for the Wamego Chamber. “Some of the things we did for health and safety turned out to be great for our vendors and we’re keeping those practices for future years.”

Holle said that spreading out the vendors more helped tremendously.

“Customers didn’t feel rushed to get in and out of the vendor area because it was crowded. The one-way traffic flow we implemented kept the walking traffic very organized,” said Holle. “Our vendors were incredibly pleased with the event, and we didn’t hear any negative comments.”

In Wellington, the City will host the 121st Kansas Wheat Festival from July 6 through July 10. This event will feature live music, an arts and crafts show, a car show, parade, and a picnic in the park which is open to the whole community. The Kansas Wheat Festival is Wellington’s largest event, and they sell buttons each year to help support the event.

“Each year, we hold a community contest for the design of the button for the event,” said Valerie Earl, Chamber Director for Wellington. “We have a medallion hunt leading up to the Wheat Festival. If you have purchased a button, and registered the button, the prize you can win for finding a medallion is \$1,000. If your button is not registered, the prize is only \$100.”

In Wellington, they also have a sidewalk chalking event with local businesses and organizations participating. There are also adult trike races, a lip sync contest, and Perplexing Puzzle Contest built into the schedule for the Festival.

As the Chamber Director, Earl noted that they have moved their regular events, like the Chamber Coffees, to a larger location, which has been well-received.



TULIP FESTIVAL



TULIP FESTIVAL



TULIP FESTIVAL



KANSAS WHEAT FESTIVAL



KATY DAYS





In Parsons, the annual Katy Days event has been pushed back a few months for 2021. Katy Days is a three-day festival usually held over Memorial Day weekend. The event draws thousands and includes live music, children's activities, food vendors, and several other events.

"We didn't want to cancel the event. The decision was made recently to move that event to later in the year and it is now scheduled for September 17-19," said Jim Zaleski, Economic Development and Tourism Director for the City of Parsons. "The event should be much the same, but the new date was agreed upon on to allow more attendees in what is hoped to be a healthier and safer environment later this fall."

Zaleski feels like the community is reaching a new level of comfort in attending outside events. He's looking to offer some hybrid opportunities as part of the festival and noted that creating an atmosphere that is welcoming to all, no matter their comfort level, is necessary for event planning nowadays.

In terms of hotel capacity and booking, Zaleski said Parsons' hotels are seeing a definite rebound of activity for business travel in the post-COVID era.

"Our hotels are still taking a lot of precautions, but the business travel is certainly robust Monday through Thursday," said Zaleski.



In Merriam, they are looking forward to the big events that occur in the City each summer. This year, they are working on hosting several events including the one-year anniversary of opening the City's new pool.

Merriam has also worked hard to find ways to keep community members connected during COVID. The City has hosted several events with masks and social distancing.

"We have a great Recreation Coordinator who has worked really hard to find events we can hold even during a pandemic," said Anna Slocum, Merriam's Parks and Recreation Director.

Earlier this year, the City hosted a "Build a Plush" event where kids were able to come to the Merriam Community Center and create their own stuffed animal. The City also had an Easter egg hunt outside with masks, hosted art gallery receptions with socially distanced practices, and held an event just for adults to paint and make a porch sign.



MERRIAM EVENTS

"We know that moms need to have events, too," said Slocum. "Our Recreation Coordinator worked with our local Home Depot to get some supplies donated and we pulled off a class that was really appreciated."

Later this summer, Merriam will hold their annual Turkey Creek Car Show and Merriam Drive Live.

"Merriam Drive Live is a one-day festival where we feature food trucks and live music," said Slocum.

In Bel Aire, 2020 marked the 40th anniversary of the City's incorporation. Rather than not hold any events in 2020, the City got creative and held three events that kept safety in the forefront but allowed for celebration, too.

"For the 4th of July last year, we held our event, 40th on the 4th," said Ashley Sherwood, Assistant Recreation Director for the City of Bel Aire. "There were fireworks and outdoor games at City Hall. Then, in the fall, we did a Fall Fun Day with a car show, live music, parade, and we had a digital costume contest instead of an in-person contest in 2020."

The final event to celebrate their 40th birthday was A December to Remember. This event included a holiday light show and fireworks.

"The holiday light show was really popular," said Sherwood. "Our city staff designed the light show and people honked from their cars instead of clapping at the end. It was so fun; we are going to do the holiday event again this year."

In cities with colleges, many of the academic and athletic events were cancelled. Sports seasons were cut short or there was limited ticketing for spectators. In Pittsburg, they were able to hold the National Track and Field Championships for junior colleges in March 2020, with many precautions in place.

"The track and field event was the first large event we held in a year," said Devin Gorman, Executive Director of the Crawford County Convention and Visitors Bureau. "We had a lot of safety protocols in place from testing all volunteers and officials to daily temp checks on athletes. As far as we know, we didn't have any COVID transmission from the event and it went off very smoothly. We hosted 509 athletes from 34 different teams from around the country that weekend."

Pittsburg also recently hosted their first convention post-pandemic.

"On Memorial Day weekend, we hosted a Four State Farm Show at the Plaster Center on the Pittsburg State University campus," said Gorman. "There were over 800 booths for vendors between the Plaster Center and a field nearby and we pulled in approximately 15,000 to 20,000 people that weekend to the event."

Even here at the League, we're testing the waters with events again. This June, we are holding two in-person events for city officials. Our next test of planning for in-person events will come when the League holds our Annual Conference in October in Topeka.

"We're paying close attention to what the best practices are for group gatherings," said Kate Cooley, League Conference and Marketing Coordinator. "We always want people to be safe at our events, but COVID has given us a new level of planning challenges for events. We will still put on a great conference and we hope our members show up and return to events because we know networking and education is important." 🍷

🍷 **Megan Gilliland** is the League's Communications and Education Manager. She can be reached at mgilliland@lkm.org.



NJCRR TRACK & FIELD CHAMPIONSHIPS



40TH ON THE 4TH



A DECEMBER TO REMEMBER



FOUR STATE FARM SHOW