City Council to decide next month

The coronavirus pandemic is what did in the annual Best of the Best Rodeo last summer, but the city is not ready to decide whether or not to put a halt to this year's event.

Even though city staff recommended cancellation, the Gallup City Council decided to give organizers time to put together a proposal regarding the rodeo for presentation at the April 13 meeting. A decision by council members is expected the same night.

Promoter Walt Eddy was among those at the March 9 meeting urging the council not to cancel the rodeo that night because if they did, he predicted, a story from the media would cause potential advertisers to sour even if things changed and the city could host the event after all.

"We're going to re-address it in another month and see if we're going to be able to have it," Eddy told the *Gallup Sun* after the meeting. "If the city is wanting to have it, I'm wanting to do it. Everybody is wanting to do this if it is possible with restrictions in the state."

Eddy told the newspaper before the meeting he hoped the council would give him time to plan for a 2021 rodeo and not cancel it outright, knowing the state coronavirus restrictions could change. According to Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham's red to green framework, McKinley County was still in red status on March 9. Under red status large gatherings would permit only five people or 40 cars to be in attendance.

"As more people are getting the vaccine, New Mexico and McKinley County are both very optimistic that things are getting ready to change," Eddy said.

Only one day later, the status of the county changed to green.

"Hopefully, by August, we can have more [people] at an event," Eddy said.

In an interview, Assistant City Manager Jon DeYoung expressed optimism that the event would take place regardless of restrictions.

“We’re going to do the best we can with whatever state we’re in — whether it be red, yellow, green … and strategize based on those current health orders,” DeYoung said. “If the mayor and council direct us to have the event, we will make sure we follow the guidelines. We will do our best to put on the event.”

DeYoung said the proposal to the council would include a contract for Eddy’s professional services, as well as a budget needed to put on the event.

Even though last year’s Best of the Best Rodeo was canceled due to the pandemic, Eddy said he has proceeded as normal in organizing for 2021.

“We’ve been working on it the same way we have every year with the assumption that it’s going to happen, knowing it might not,” he said. “We haven’t spent any money advertising and we would have this month in previous years.”

At the March 9 council meeting, DeYoung gave some thoughts on event logistics when pressed on it by councilors.

After Dist. 4 Councilor Fran Palochak asked if it would be possible to push the rodeo back to August or September as opposed to June, DeYoung said the city’s decision would hinge on getting contracts in place, knowing what event capacity limits are, and getting enough contestants to register.

Palochak asked if it was possible to compete with social distancing and restrictions, such as not having spectators. DeYoung said they might need to restrict ticket sales and have a system in place to track who is coming in and out of the venue.

The Best of the Best Rodeo, which started in 2013, brings high school students together to compete in eight different activities, from pole bending to steer wrestling, at Red Rock State Park. In 2019, over $160,000 was awarded in cash, as well as $35,000 in prizes. That year, the

event drew over 520 contestants from 21 states, Eddy said.

“It’s a heck of an economic boost,” he continued. “I’m not a graduate with a tourism degree ... but bringing people from outside the community into your community for an extended stay sounds like a pretty good way to advance tourism.”

DeYoung also touted the rodeo, even as the city lost nearly $77,500 after deciding to cancel it last year — though that figure was tens of thousands less than what the city estimated it would lose.

“It’s just growing each year. We’re getting more and more contestants,” DeYoung said. “We get a lot of people from all over the country coming to Gallup and they get to experience our community and shop. That’s what I really miss out on.”

Eddy is pleased with what the rodeo has evolved into since its inception.

“I’m super proud of taking an idea from infancy into one of the most successful high school rodeos ever,” he said.

While Eddy is hoping for Best of the Best Rodeo for FY 2021 to be approved when it comes up at the council meeting in April, the City Council meeting minutes released on March 11 state that “If the event is limited in capacity, which is likely, then fee revenue will not support this event. Staff is recommending canceling the Best of the Best Rodeo in June 2021.”

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