

## The view from below

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent  
Friday, 01 December 2023 05:49

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### **County landlubbers enjoy balloon rally from the ground**

The Red Rock Balloon Rally is a big deal every year, especially for the balloon enthusiasts who flock here from near and far to participate. For them, any day aloft is a good day.

But the rally is different for the earthbound: those colorful balloons hanging over the area like gigantic Christmas ornaments in the sky bring joy and signal the real beginning of the holiday season and the winter chill to come.

### ***LOCAL PRAISE***

“When we’re having our balloon rally, for me, it’s, ‘Oh yeah, it’s wintertime. Christmas is coming,’” McKinley County Commissioner Robert Baca said.

Baca went up in a hot air balloon for the first time last year.

“After going up the first time, I’m still scared of heights, but it’s just awesome once you are up there.... As long as I don’t look down I’m good,” he said.

McKinley County Commissioner Walt Eddy spends most of his time on rodeos, but he loves the Balloon Rally all the same.

“Gallup needs the diversity of events. We can’t just be rodeo, rodeo, rodeo,” he said. “To get people out in Gallup on the weekends we need events. It used to kind of kick off the Christmas

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season and local retail Christmas shopping.”

For lifetime Gallupians, the balloons may bring memories of school days.

“[The] Balloon Rally is one of those events that really connects the community -- there’s a buzz in the air Balloon Rally weekend in Gallup, along with the balloons, and everyone participates in some way,” GallupARTS Executive Director Rose Eason said. “When I was a teacher, we timed our fire drills to the balloon launch that Friday so we’d have an excuse to take the kids outside to watch the balloons fly past.”

## ***A COMMUNITY STAPLE***

Gallupians believe balloons let everyone get in touch with their inner child.

“Ever since being a kid, everybody enjoys watching balloons. These are just bigger and more exciting,” Gallup City Councilor Ron Molina said.

You could say Molina has an ethereal connection to the rally: He’s been in the propane business for 44 years, so the rally is good for business. But he’s also scared of heights.

“I’ve been in the gas business for 44 years. Between being in the gas business, knowing gas as well as I do, and [being] afraid of heights, I’m not about to get off the ground with a bottle of propane under my bottom,” he said.

Molina grew up in Belen and remembers balloons landing in nearby alfalfa fields when he was a child, before there was a Red Rock rally.

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“They’d apologize and vehicles would come and pick them up,” he said. “We didn’t realize at the time that it was such a special thing. It was a normal thing to wake up on a Saturday morning and see them.”

He enjoys the balloons from the ground, sometimes pulling off the road to watch when he sees them flying or sharing the experience with his grandchildren.

## ***ALL-AGES APPEAL***

Children aren’t the only ones who love to see balloons lingering in the sky like so many sugarplums dancing before their eyes.

“Granted, out here in Gallup, New Mexico, we already have gorgeous scenery. When the balloons are about and up it just adds more color to the scenery,” Pam Held, a veteran chase crew member and volunteer organizer for the Red Rock Balloon Rally Association, said. “People from everywhere can get together and not know each other really well and we all work together and have a fun weekend.”

A family connection pushed City Councilor Michael Schaaf to go up in a balloon. His brother, John, a longtime Gallup policeman, was involved in the rally through the 90s, before he retired and moved away.

“A number of times he had me be a judge. They’d fly me out – they put out an X and people would have to fly by and drop a wooden block with their name on it,” Schaaf said. “The closest to the X won a prize.”

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In recent years Schaaf has been called away over rally weekend for school board training in Albuquerque, so he's missed the rally. Others try to get out for the mass ascension every year.

"It's one of the premier events for the county. For the last couple of years, since COVID we've been one of the sponsors," County Manager Anthony Dimas said. "Usually if I'm in town I go out to see the balloon lift. I think it's a great event."

## ***BOOSTING THE COMMUNITY***

One thing that's sure to get a lift from the rally is the local economy.

"The balloon rally has a big impact. It's a great thing for the citizens. We get to see all these beautiful balloons and meet pilots from other areas. They come into town, they spend their money here," Schaaf said.

Gallup Tourism and Marketing Manager Matt Robinson ran the numbers from last year as an example. He found that the 13,000 people that attended last year's rally pushed the area's hotel occupancy rate for the weekend to about 56%. That's roughly 2,600 hotel room nights, which accounts for nearly half of the estimated \$1.014 million in direct impact the rally had on the local economy. Much of the rest was from food and beverage sales.

"It does attract a healthy crowd. They have discretionary income, and they spend it here. It's good for the economy. They are a happy group and it's a good bonding time for all of them. In that respect, it lifts the spirits of the city a little bit," Gallup BID Director Francis Bee said.

Bee credits the rally association and Gallup McKinley Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Bill Lee for making each year more memorable.

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“Bill does a very good job of being an ambassador for Gallup and McKinley County to these people who come in from out of town for the balloon rally,” Bee said. “Those people in turn can become goodwill ambassadors for Gallup themselves, because they came here and had a good experience.”

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