

MESA NEWS

Celebrating freedom in Mesa

Fun begins at 6 tonight; fireworks are on Saturday

By Jim Walsh
THE REPUBLIC | AZCENTRAL.COM

Mesa Mayor Scott Smith admits he was disappointed when Mesa lost its annual fireworks show a year ago because of a lack of money, ending a nearly 50-year tradition, but he immediately recognized an opportunity to replace it with something better.

Smith's vision for a weekend-long celebration of Americana will be put to a challenging test tonight and Saturday with the inaugural Arizona Celebration of Freedom.

Sponsored by Southwest Ambulance, the Chicago Cubs and a host of other donors, the festival will culminate Saturday night with pyrotechnics displays set off from the roofs of City Hall and the Mesa Arts Center and fireworks launched from a nearby parking lot.

There will be no fireworks tonight. The Saturday display, dubbed "the Chicago Cubs salute to America," starts at 9 p.m., followed by the fireworks show at 9:30. Festivities on both nights begin at 6.

"I want to take the opportunity to have a real celebration and not just another fireworks show," Smith said. "I think it's going to be something different and something people don't expect."

Events are designed to appeal to almost everyone. They include:

» "Motorcycles on Main," a ride tonight sponsored by Chester's Harley-Da-

vidson.

» "American Iron Car Show" on Saturday, featuring American-made cars built in 1972 or earlier.

» An Honor Walk and Fallen Soldiers Memorial is scheduled at the Mesa Arts Center, honoring all Arizona soldiers killed in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

» "Heritage Lane," a collection of inflatable replicas of historic buildings in Washington, including the Capitol, White House, Supreme Court, and Washington Monument; and Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Visitors can sign replicas of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

» Arts and crafts booths and displays about Mesa community organizations.

"This is a party for America, a party for who are," Smith said.

The festival allows Smith to deliver on one of his campaign promises, to restore some downtown festivals without tapping into city revenues. Several festivals were canceled when Mesa eliminated its special-events budget because of a series of deep budget shortfalls in recent years.

The Celebration of Freedom replaces a longtime fireworks show sponsored by the Sertoma Club of Mesa. The show was a Mesa tradition that was held at Mesa Community College's football stadium for 35 years, from 1973 to 2008 before it fizzled from a lack of donations last year.

But the show dated to 1960, when it was held at Mesa High School's Jackrabbit Stadium.

Smith is more interested in looking forward to the new show, however, than dwelling on the past.

"I'm excited and anxious," he said.

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