

OFFICIALS IN DARK ON SIZE OF ECLIPSE CROWDS

Cookeville, Putnam Co., TN

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By Terri Likens

People are expected to converge on the area for the Aug. 21 full solar eclipse.



But just how many — and what their impact will be — is still something of a shot in the dark, however, for authorities who are making plans to deal with the influx.

(Pictured: Mayor Ricky Shelton, left, and Zach Ledbetter, vice president of the Cookeville-Putnam County Convention and Visitors Bureau,

look over plans of the eclipse event. Ty Kernea | Herald-Citizen)

The Great American Eclipse, as it has been dubbed, is a high magnitude, once-in-500-years, coast-to-coast event, so authorities don't have planning baseline to turn to. They just know lots of people are likely to come.

State highway officials say the narrow coast-to-coast strip of full visibility is likely to pull people from as far away as a 12-hour drive.

Some officials expect it to be the largest day of human migration in the United States, according to Zachary Ledbetter, vice president of the Cookeville-Putnam County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

"We are keenly aware of how taxing that event could be for us," said Cookeville Police Major Carl Sells this week.

Sells said area agencies — police, fire, rescue, Tennessee Tech officials and even representative from utilities that might be strained — are in the early stages of coordinating who will be doing what when it comes to handling the influx.

"We're pooling our resources."

Although hard numbers are impossible to come by at this point, the area is expecting no shortage of visitors from elsewhere in Tennessee, out-of-state and even abroad.

"This is an international event," noted Megan Buell, Tennessee Highway Patrol communications director. "It's received worldwide attention."

The highway patrol is focusing its manpower on major roadways, Buell said, working closely with other police agencies and the Tennessee Department of Transportation.

The eclipse path through Tennessee is roughly from Clarksville to Cleveland.

TDOT communications director B.J. Doughty said the agency will be using its overhead and portable message boards to help keep things safe.

About a week before the event, the transportation department will start displaying messages about the eclipse that ask motorists to plan for greater traffic, Doughty said. By the weekend, the agency will display warnings of potential traffic backups. They will also have more TDOT "help" trucks to assist stranded motorists and other state vehicles out the weekend before and on the Monday of the eclipse.

With just traffic to worry about, state transportation officials are turning to their experience with major music festivals in the state for some guidance.

"We're looking at it very much like we'd be looking at Bonnaroo or the Country Music Festival," Doughty said. She said Nashville is projecting a potential doubling of its population for the eclipse.

Cookeville, which is near the center of the long eclipse path, is a prime viewing area, especially when its location on Interstate 40 and visitor amenities are considered.

With a major viewing event planned at Tennessee Tech's Tucker Stadium, traffic will be pulled into the heart of town. Hotels have been long booked.

One hint about how big a deal the event is has been confirmed by city officials. They said a group of Japanese wanted to rent the city's entire Cane Creek Sportsplex — eight ball fields and other facilities — for the event. No deal had been made as of the middle of last week.

Cookeville and Cummins Falls State Park were listed this month by Outside Magazine as one of six places in the country to see the eclipse. Cummins Falls, it noted, was offering a rare opportunity to camp at the park for \$50. Those sites, however, sold out quickly.

Emergency officials aren't the only one planning for the eclipse.

Dr. Nathan Podoll, a comprehensive ophthalmologist at Vanderbilt Medical Center, said the medical community is doing what it can to warn people of the dangers of viewing the eclipse without the proper eye protection.

He still expects to see problems from people who don't know better or ignored warnings.

"I hope we don't see a great amount," Podoll said. "I'm sure there will be some."

The eclipse's falling on a Monday, as opposed to a weekend, should make it easier to work in those who do injure their retinas.

"We always have triage appointments," he said.

*Read more about Putnam Co., TN & surrounding areas at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>