

Businesses, cities cashing in on total solar eclipse crowds

By ADRIAN SAINZ
Associated Press

BARTLETT, Tenn. — Millions of eyes will be fixed on the sky when a total solar eclipse crosses the U.S. in August, and it's likely many of them will be safely behind the special glasses churned out by a Tennessee company.

American Paper Optics ramped up production for this year's eclipse and expects to make 50 million paper and plastic eclipse glasses. John Jerit, the company's CEO and president, said they began preparing about two years ago. During his almost 27 years making safety glasses, he's only seen one total solar eclipse, in France in 1999, but will be going to Nashville for this one.

"It's a life experience," Jerit said during an interview at his company's office in the Memphis suburb of Bartlett. "When that two minutes is over, or however long you've got, the question that you really want to hear is, 'When is the next one?'"

His company is one of many businesses — hotels, campgrounds and stores — taking advantage of the total solar eclipse — when the moon passes between Earth and the sun. The moon's shadow will fall in a diagonal ribbon across the U.S., from Oregon to South Carolina. The rest of the U.S. will experience a partial eclipse, along with Canada, Central America and a bit of South America.

Cities and towns along the path of totality — where there will be about 2½ minutes of darkness — are gearing up for the crowds. St. Joseph, Missouri, population 76,000, is in a prime location and officials are bracing for tens of thousands of eclipse watchers to descend on the city, said Beth Conway, spokeswoman for the St. Joseph Convention Center and Visitors Bureau.

The city's restaurants, gas stations and stores are preparing for the onslaught — the city's largest arts and music festival with the nickname "Total Eclipse of the Arts" is scheduled on the weekend leading up to the eclipse on Monday, Aug. 21.

"This is essentially our Super Bowl," Conway said. "If we see anywhere near the amount of



American Paper Optics President and CEO John Jerit looks at a display of solar eclipse glasses in Bartlett, Tenn., on June 21. Jerit said the company began preparing about two years ago for the August 2017 event.

people that they're telling us, it will probably be the biggest event in our history."

The city has gotten into the act as well, selling eclipse glasses, posters and blue and yellow T-shirts decorated with a drawing of the city's skyline and an iconic railroad bridge, and with the slogan "Right in the Middle of it All."

Conway said a benefactor donated 100,000 safety glasses designed for the city and proceeds are going to local museums and charities.

Sales have been "amazing, phenomenal," she said. "It's just blown our minds."

At the Tennessee factory, a constant whirring sound fills the factory as large sheets of paper are fed into machines. One cuts out the eyeholes in the pre-printed frames, another inserts the protective film lenses. Then the glasses are punched out of the sheets and packaged.



Cardboard frames for solar eclipse glasses are stacked in the American Paper Optics. The company is one of many businesses — hotels, campgrounds and stores — taking advantage of the total solar eclipse — when the moon passes between Earth and the sun. The moon's shadow will fall in a diagonal ribbon across the U.S., from Oregon to South Carolina.

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About 50,000 glasses can roll off the assembly line per hour, Jerit said. Paper glasses cost about 20 to 25 cents to make, and they are sold to distributors for about 45 cents, but prices vary depending on order size. They're sold retail for about \$2. The plastic versions are about \$15.

Staring at the sun during an eclipse — or anytime — can cause eye damage. The only safe way is to protect your eyes with special filters in glasses or other devices. NASA lists four companies, including American Paper Optics, whose glasses meet international standards.

"It's eye protection for enjoyment," said Jerit, whose main business is making 3-D glasses.

Besides retail outlets, the company sells the glasses to cities, universities and space-related entities like NASA and the Adventure Science Center in Nashville. Some are custom-designed, like the ones for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital which are decorated with children's drawings. Under the wacky category: glasses to make the wearer look like an astronaut, space cowboy or a green alien.

Green Acres farm near Casper, Wyoming, is one of the many farms and parks welcoming eclipse watchers. The farm has been turned into a campground with 300 campsites in prime eclipse viewing territory.

"We have people coming from Australia, Belgium, several from Canada. I have a guy from England coming that's seen 17 eclipses," said manager Dwain Romsa. "We're a little more remote than some areas. It takes more effort to travel here."

Sluggish but durable: U.S. economy recession-free for eight years

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. economy acquired an exclusive label Friday: Recession-free for eight full years. Yet the third-longest economic winning streak in American history still doesn't get much love.

No wonder: Despite its longevity, this expansion has delivered subpar gains in its pace of growth, full-time hiring and pay increases since it emerged from the wreckage of the Great Recession in June 2009. It's the weakest economic recovery since World War II.

And the gap between the richest among us and everyone else has widened.

Still, the economy is hardly the disaster that President Donald Trump insists he inherited. Employers have been hiring steadily, month after month, since 2010. A majority of Americans now enjoy unusual job security.

The government estimated Friday that the economy grew at a 2.6 percent annual rate from April through June. It wasn't sizzling. But just the fact that the economy has sustained its growth since mid-2009 represents a major statistical milestone.

Staying power

The National Bureau of Economic Research has been measuring U.S. recessions and expansions since the 1850s. Over that time — from President Franklin Pierce's administration to Trump's — only two expansions have matched the lifespan of the one that officially began in June 2009 and has endured for 96 months:

- A 106-month expansion that ran from February 1961 to December 1969, when President Lyndon Johnson stoked growth with spending on domestic programs and the Vietnam war.

- And a 120-month streak that began in March 1991 and ended in March 2001, after the dotcom bubble burst.

What's more, the job market has enjoyed a remarkable run: Employers have added jobs for 81 straight months — easily the longest streak on record. And the number of Americans applying for first-time unemployment benefits has stayed below 300,000 for 125 straight weeks. That's the longest such streak since 1970, when the population and workforce were much smaller.

It's no boom

Compared with the other two long-lasting expansions, the current one looks, well, weak. America's gross domestic product has grown less than 19 percent over the past eight years — much less than the 51 percent growth posted in the first eight years

of the 1961-1969 expansion and the 34 percent in the same span of the 1991-2001 expansion.

Job growth has been consistent but hardly robust. A big reason is just how bleak the job picture was eight years ago. The Great Recession wiped out 7.4 million jobs. And the job market didn't actually hit bottom until February 2010 — eight months after the recession ended.

Over the past eight years, the number of U.S. jobs has risen just 12 percent to 146 million. Over the same span, job gains had surged 30 percent in the 1961-1969 expansion and 18 percent in the 1991-2001 expansion.

The current recovery was stunted at the outset by lingering wreckage from the financial crisis. Consumers stopped borrowing after having charged too much on

their credit cards and having watched their home values sink. Banks, struggling with bad loans, tightened credit.

Since then, the expansion has been hobbled by a slow-growing labor force and by a puzzling slump in worker productivity, which is the amount of output produced, per hour worked.

Job growth exceeded 200,000 a month in 2014 and 2015 but has been trending lower — 180,000 a month so far this year — in part because there are fewer who want or need a job.

Meager pay gains

Americans are still waiting for shrinking unemployment — the 4.4 percent jobless rate is near a 16-year low — to translate into healthier wages.

Comparisons are difficult because the government didn't track hourly pay for all private-sector workers

until 2006. But according to government data gathered by the Economic Policy Institute dating to 1947, pay for rank-and-file workers, adjusted for inflation, rose just 3.5 percent from 2009 to 2016. That was a sharp slowdown from the 6 percent increase from 1991 to 1998 and 13.5 percent from 1961 to 1968.

Little progress for those who've suffered most

As the economy rebounded from the Great Recession, the very richest benefited most. Emmanuel Saez, an economist at the University of California, Berkeley, found that 52 percent of income gains from 2009 to 2015 went to the richest 1 percent of Americans. (In the first three years of the expansion, the discrepancy was far starker: The top 1 percent received 91 percent of income gains.)

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