

COMMUNITY from page 1A

Henry continued, "This is what a small town is all about — and especially thanks to our community members for their support of our police department and the city."

Besides the Florence Police Department, which hosted and planned the event, other first response agencies also attended, including the Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians Police Department, Oregon State Police, Siuslaw Valley Fire and Rescue, Western Lane Ambulance District and U.S. Coast Guard Station Siuslaw River. In addition, Florence Community PTA, Siuslaw School Board Bond Advisory Committee, Siuslaw Public Library, the Siuslaw Vision 2020, Siuslaw Outreach Services, Siuslaw Youth Soccer Association, Kiwanis Club of Florence and more also led activities and shared information.

"You had organizations like the Siuslaw Public Library and the Vision mixed in with a bounce house and a giant slide," Gordor said. "You could target those families and talk to the parents about the organization while their kid was on the inflatable. It gave a really good moment for local businesses and nonprofits to work with community members."

The activities were spread out around Miller Park, with giant inflatables drawing youth and families to explore nearly every corner.

This was partly to place the inflatables near power sources and away from irrigation lines.

"We did do it a little bit on purpose, too, to give people those opportunities to go around to see everything," Gordor said.

Mixed in with the attendees were representatives from Florence Police Department, including Commander John Pitcher, who could be seen trying several of the games and competing against the kids.

"I got beat at the soccer kick twice," Pitcher said. "I'm very happy with the event. It turned out great."

"Our city and our police department made sure that all of our officers were there — all of them, even dispatchers and our Police Employee Association," Gordor said.



PHOTOS BY MARK BRENNAN AND CHANTELE MEYER/SIUSLAW NEWS

Florence Police Department's National Night Out on Aug. 7 brought together donors, volunteers and community members to celebrate police-neighborhood partnerships.



It was a chance for residents to interact with the police in a positive, community-focused event. Everyone ate the same meal. Everyone got the same opportunities.

"When you have Rhody Days and the carnival, some people can't go to that," Pitcher said. "They can't afford for their kids to go there and spend hours there. Here, everybody got exactly the same thing. They had access to everything, including face painting and all the bouncy houses. There was no discrimination or difference between what their parents had."

Gordor added, "It was just a level playing field and everyone was equal. We heard families talking to each other about that, and how nice it was because it felt like a carnival for their kids without them having to worry about the expense."

Expense could have been a concern for the police department, since Chief Tom Turner approved Florence's involvement in National Night Out only a couple months ago.

"We didn't have this planned in the budget," Gordor said.

That wasn't a problem for Florence.

Pitcher said, "Our community steps up. When we first put out a request that we were going to need some financial help and volunteers, they just started coming in."

The first donors approached the department just days after Turner presented the possibility of the event to the Florence City Council.

According to Gordor, Dr. Charles Korando contacted her the first week. Along with Jon Thompson and a few others, they offered to pay the entirety of the cost for the hamburgers and hot dogs.

"It was the people," she said. "Altogether, we received over \$4,500 in donations. ... When word got out from the initial press release in the paper, it was just an outpour from community members who said, 'If you're doing this, what can we do to help?' ... It just took off from there."

People donated time, money and service to help launch the event, as well as to provide prizes and raffles on the night.

"They said, 'I want to,'" Pitcher said.

Gordor gave the example of community member Katie Prosser, who invited PeaceHealth employees who work with anesthetics to join the volunteers.

"There were five of them, and it wasn't through PeaceHealth," Gordor said. "It was Katie reaching out, saying, 'My husband and his coworkers really want to help support this. What can they do?' ... It worked out that they knew Mayor Henry and RJ

Pilcher and I could have eight of them help with food — four on the grill, and they could rotate out if they needed to."

Florence Police Department personnel and their families also helped.

"Besides organizations, there were an additional 30 community members who said, 'Here I am, here's my name, put me where you need me,'" Gordor said. "For a community our size, it sounded like we were doing something right."

"Please say how much we appreciate and we thank the donors and the volunteers," Pitcher emphasized. "It was huge. Without them, we could not have done it."

Some people also donated during the event, even though the event was free to all.

"People just kept handing us money to go toward this," Gordor said. "It really goes to show how our community feels about our law enforcement, which is really positive."

Pitcher said, "It was very community-, neighborhood- and friend-oriented. It was a blast."

The initial plans for Florence's

National Night Out involved tying into another event, or possibly being held indoors in case of weather. Through the planning process and the immediate public support, the event transformed to include a larger space and more community involvement.

"I know what Toledo does, and I know what the Newport area does, and I saw on TV what the Springfield and Eugene area does, and they didn't compare to what we did," Pitcher said. "We blew them away!"

As the event organizer, Gordor had to communicate with National Association of Town Watch, the founders of National Night.

"From talking with someone there, they felt that our effort, and what we were intending to do, was pretty remarkable for a community our size," Gordor said. "We set the bar really high for ourselves, and that's a good thing."

The "good things" continued throughout the week.

"Whatever we had left over from what we as a department purchased, we donated to Siuslaw

Outreach Services, Boys and Girls Club and Florence Food Share," Gordor said. "We tried to spread the giving."

Besides police personnel, volunteers and city staff, Gordor also worked with City of Florence Public Works to plan the event.

"Truly, this would not have been possible without our Public Works Department. Hands down. If it was not for (Public Works Director) Mike Miller and those guys days in advance taking a radar to the field to make sure we didn't stake an irrigation line, taking the extra time to run the electrical so there wasn't a safety issue and bringing blocks ... They took those extra steps, and they were there with us until 10 p.m. cleaning up," Gordor said. "It was pretty phenomenal."

While it is still much too early to say what Florence will plan for next year, both Pitcher and Gordor are confident that the community engagement will continue.

"I didn't hear one bad thing," Pitcher said. "All the kids I saw were having a blast and the parents enjoyed it. And there were no incidents. Everyone had fun and had a good time, and I just couldn't be happier. This year turned out perfect."

The National Night Out came right on the heels of another city-sponsored community event, the City of Florence 125th anniversary Block Party, held on July 27. While some people were worried that the two events were so close, Pitcher said the events didn't seem like too much for one community to participate in.

"The Block Party was a great big success," he said. "It was a little more for adults, and this was more for families and kids."

"Really, with what we've done recently, from hosting the Oregon Mayor's Conference, having the Block Party and now National Night Out — we've done something good for our community," Gordor said. "But just look what they've done for us. So thank you."

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