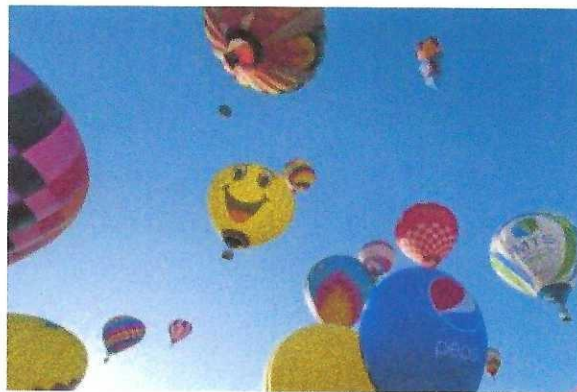


AUGUST 3, 2020

Largest summertime hot air balloon festival in the country postponed until 2021

The Daily: Murphy tightening restrictions on indoor gatherings, amid NJ COVID rebound; Largest summertime hot air balloon festival in the country postponed until 2021

By: *Gabrielle Saulsbery*



The New Jersey Lottery Festival of Ballooning in association with PNC Bank has been postponed due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and protocols limiting the size of outdoor gatherings, the operator announced Monday.

The annual summer event, which would be in its 38th year, is now scheduled for July 23-25, 2021. This marks the first time since 1983 that the festival won't go on.

"The health and safety of our attendees, hot air balloon pilots, crew, performers, sponsors, vendors, volunteers and staff has been and will always be our top priority," said Festival Executive Producer Howard Freeman in a prepared statement. "We hoped that when we decided in the spring to move this year's festival from July to mid-October, the festival would provide a welcome relief and help us heal from this crisis. But at this point, there are too many variables out of our control and we must remain steadfast in upholding our commitment to safety first."

Freeman called the decision to further postpone the festival "extremely difficult," noting that it usually brings thousands of folks together each summer.

Currently, outdoor gatherings are limited to 500 people.

The festival, which was previously known as the QuickChek New Jersey Festival of Ballooning, began as a gathering of local hot air balloon enthusiasts. It has since grown into and remains the largest summertime hot air balloon and music festival in North America, according to Freeman.

Up to 100 hot air balloons take flight twice daily over the annual three-day festival at Solberg Airport in Readington, which also features concerts, fireworks, and more. Upward of 165,000 people attend each year.

"We will now move ahead with planning next year's festival in its normal summertime slot and looking forward to brighter skies ahead when our community and all of our balloonatic friends can safely be together," Freeman said.

This was supposed to be the inaugural year of New Jersey Lottery's title sponsorship as it celebrates its 50th anniversary. When its title sponsorship was announced in February, New Jersey Lottery Executive Director James

Carey said the festival would be a great platform “to remind New Jersey about the Lottery’s 50th anniversary and all of our fun and entertaining lottery games,” and said the organization was “thrilled to preserve this gem, which has meant so much to so many people across New Jersey for over 30 years.”

But due to COVID-19, they must wait. Folks who already purchased admission, hot air balloon rides, and Blue Sky Club Memberships for the 2020 festival will be able to use them at the 2021 festival.

Anyone who purchased tickets will receive an email detailing the deferral, exchange, and refund options on Aug. 4.