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NJ balloon festival postponed until 2021

Jenna Intersimone, Bridgewater Courier News



READINGTON – The 38th annual New Jersey Lottery Festival of Ballooning is the latest major event in the Garden State to join the growing list of events lost this year because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Event organizers announced Monday that the festival, slated for Oct. 16-18 at Solberg Airport, has been rescheduled for July 23-25, 2021. The event was originally scheduled for July 24-26 before organizers announced in May it was pushed to October.

The festival, the largest summertime hot air balloon and music festival in North America, will not go off for the first time since 1983, because of current New Jersey health guidelines and protocols limiting the size of outdoor crowd gatherings, organizers said.

"We are heartbroken for the thousands of people who were looking forward to this year's festival, one which brings our community and our state together every summer to celebrate the magic of ballooning," the festival's Executive Producer Howard Freeman said in a statement.

"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," he continued. "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."

Ticket holders can use their admission tickets, hot air balloon rides, Blue Sky Club Memberships, Sunrise Breakfast Tickets, and more at the 2021 festival, organizers said.

On Tuesday, anyone who purchased tickets will receive an email detailing the deferral/exchange/refund options. No further action is required by ticket purchasers until they receive the email, organizers said.

This would have been the first year of the New Jersey Lottery's title sponsorship of the festival.

"We are extremely proud of how New Jersey has come together to fight the COVID-19 virus, while serving as an example for the rest of the nation," Freeman said. "However, as Gov. [Phil] Murphy has only authorized mass gatherings of up to 500 people at this time, the reasonable and responsible thing to do is to come back bigger and better next year."

Featuring twice-a-day mass ascensions of up to 100 hot air balloons, live concerts, fireworks, a nighttime balloon glow, children's amusement rides and hundreds of crafters and food vendors, the festival has been named the premier family entertainment attraction in New Jersey by the USA TODAY NETWORK; the top festival in the state and one of the Top 50 festivals in America by MSN Lifestyle and was named the No. 1 Thing to Do in the state by New Jersey Monthly magazine.

The festival attracted 169,500 attendees from around the world in 2019, including all 21 counties in the state, as well as hot air balloon pilots from 24 states and two countries.

The festival has a significant impact on New Jersey's travel and tourism and the local community, with an economic impact of \$52.4 million and raising more than \$3 million to date to benefit local charities, nonprofit organizations and children's specialized hospitals.

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