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Weight of trash sets rally fans at 100,000

Every year's estimates based on guesses

By Bill Bowden
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FAYETTEVILLE — It has been billed as the fourthlargest motorcycle rally in America, but Bikes, Blues & BBQ organizers plan to quit saying it attracts 400,000 people every year.

A former promoter said the festival attracted "at least 100,000" this year.

Based on garbage - which is used in some crowd estimates - that number looks more accurate than 400,000.

"We're just not going to put a number to it," said Bob Corscadden, whose company, Jimbob Inc., currently does promotions for the rally. "No one can justify it, so to take a guess at it, who knows? It's not like we get any special kudos for being the thirdlargest or fifth-largest."

On Thursday, Corscaddenchanged the 400,000 reference on the Bikes, Blues & BBQ Web site to "hundreds of thousands."

Rally size estimates can help attract vendors and visitors. Bikes, Blues & BBQ organizers used the 400,000 estimate of last year's attendance when seeking sponsors earlier this year. It's close to the 414,917 estimate used last year by the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally in South Dakota, which is generally considered the biggest bike rally in America. Sturgis organizers say 442,163 attended their 2009 rally.

Corscadden said this year - the 10th anniversary - was the biggest ever for Bikes, Blues & BBQ, but he said that's based on casual observations by police who said the crowd appeared to be larger than last year.



Jason Ivester Bikers cruise along Dickson Street in Fayetteville during the 10th annual Bikes, Blues & BBQ Motorcycle Rally last month. Getting an accurate count on the number of attendees is a challenge, but organizers say the event has had continued growth.

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And then there's the trash. Sanitation trucks are weighed at the disposal site, revealing how much trash they contain.

Bikes, Blues & BBQ used garbage collections last year to gauge its growth from 2007. Trash collected after the rally was up 34 percent from 45 tons to 60.1 tons. For 2009, it increased another 3 percent to 62 tons.

But the week-long Sturgis rally generated nine times that amount of trash - 564.8 tons.

The Sturgis rally uses several factors to estimate crowd size, but if their per-person per-day garbage number alone was used to calculate attendance for the Arkansas rally, it would put the crowd at this year's Bikes, Blues & BBQ at 86,111.

The Sturgis rally was held Aug. 3-9. The Bikes, Blues & BBQ festival was Sept. 24-27.

Based on the numbers, the average Sturgis attendee generated 2.6 pounds of garbage during the rally.

By contrast, if 400,000 people attended the Bikes, Blues & BBQ festival, each generated only about 5 ounces of trash during the fourday festival. That's about the weight of eight empty beer cans or one glass bottle.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says the country generates 4.5 pounds of trash per person per day, but that includes both business and residential garbage.

"Perhaps motorcycle riders are thoughtful people who limit garbage generation," Farouk El-Baz said via e-mail.

El-Baz is director of the Center for Remote Sensing at Boston University and an expert in estimating crowd sizes.

He applies satellite sensing techniques to aerial photographs to come up with his estimates. He said it's difficult to make accurate estimates from ground level or low-flying helicopters.

El-Baz lives in Laconia, N.H., which has a large motorcycle rally every year in June. But he doesn't use garbage in his calculations and doesn't know of a scientist who does.

"I have not heard any screams about garbage amounts," he said of the Laconia Motorcycle Week, which has been estimated to bring in 350,000 people and had its 86th anniversary this year.

Brenda Vasknetz, director of the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, said garbage collection is one of five factors organizers use to estimate crowd size. They also look at the number of vendor licenses issued, sales taxes collected and traffic counts at two locations - in town and at Mount Rushmore. To get the estimate, Sturgis officials subtract the average amount of local garbage from the formula so only "rally garbage" is counted, she said.

In Fayetteville, however, estimates are based more on eyeball assessments.

Greg Mack, owner of Taylor Mack Advertising, said he came up with the first Bikes, Blues & BBQ crowd estimate of 140,000 in 2002.

Standing on Dickson Street with a couple of Fayetteville police officers, Mack asked them how many people they thought were in the festival crowd, suggesting 70,000. That's about the same number of people it would take to fill the University of Arkansas' Reynolds Razorback Stadium. The officers agreed. Then, Mack asked about the entire festival, and doubled the suggestion. They agreed again.

"I just made that number up," Mack said. "Every year, I would add 20 percent to it. They're basing everything off a number that was made up in the first place."

Mack did advertising for Bikes, Blues & BBQ from 2002-07. The festival was growing rapidly, so Mack thought the 20 percent increases were about right based on increases in T-shirt sales.

The organizers of Bikes, Blues & BBQ also bill it as the "fastest-growing" motorcycle rally in the country, but it may no longer be growing.

Mack thinks the rally peaked in size in 2006, when his estimate put the crowd at about 250,000. He said last month's rally was probably the smallest one since 2006 but the best one ever.

"I think it's successful and it's better that way," Mack said. "That 400,000 number is way inflated. You don't have to be the biggest to be the best."

Mack said this year's crowd was "at least 100,000."

"There's really no way to quantify it," he said. "I don't think this town could hold 400,000 people."

The state can't break sales tax collection numbers out by event or week, said Lindsley Smith, Fayetteville's city communications director. So tax numbers aren't used in the Bikes, Blues & BBQ crowd estimate.

Corscadden said the number of vendors who came to the Fayetteville rally was up 15 percent to 20 percent from last year, but he didn't have exact numbers.

The 62-ton garbage estimate includes 60.3 tons of trash collected by Roll Off Service around Dickson Street and the University of Arkansas, and another 1.75 tons generated by related events at the Northwest Arkansas Mall. Cory Wolfe, sales manager at Lowell-based Roll Off Service, provided the number for his company and the estimate for the mall trash.

The Arkansas Highway and Transportation Department has a traffic counter on Interstate 540 just south of Fayetteville. On an average Saturday, about 200 motorcycles pass by the counter, said David Nilles, a spokesman for the Highway Department. On Sept. 26, the main day of the rally, the motorcycle count was 5,204. That's a 26-fold increase.

Corscadden said most bikers would rather travel the two-lane roads, so the traffic count only included a fraction of them who were traveling I-540. Automobile traffic was down 4 percent from usual at that counter on Saturday. The Highway Department doesn't have a counter in the city of Fayetteville.

Corscadden said police in helicopters indicated that "it's just a wall of bikes from Fort Smith to Bella Vista to Eureka Springs."

Fayetteville police Sgt. Creston Mackey said his department gets crowd estimates from Bikes, Blues & BBQ organizers.

"Obviously, there's no way to say [how many attend] because there's no way to do an actual head count," he said.

Estimating crowds by trash collected isn't an exact science, but no other methods are precise either, said David Feldman, author of *Imponderables: The Solution to the Mysteries of Everyday Life*.

"There's a lot of pressure to not release the real numbers," said Feldman, who studied parade-crowd estimates in particular. "The true figure is always between the police estimate and the organizer's estimate. It's usually closer to the police."

In the case of Bikes, Blues & BBQ, though, the police estimate wasn't based on an official count, but on Mack's original suggestion of 140,000.

Estimates of crowd size at a recent anti-tax "tea party" event in Washington, D.C., ranged from 10,000 to 2 million, depending on whether you were talking to journalists or organizers, said Feldman.

The University of Arkansas at Fayetteville's Center for Business and Economic Research did an economic analysis of Bikes, Blues & BBQ in 2005. The center estimated the impact of the rally at between \$34.7 million and \$52.1 million. But that's based on an attendance of 200,000 to 300,000, which was furnished by the organizers.

If the attendance was smaller, the economic impact would have to be divided accordingly, said Kathy Deck, director of the center.

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