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Easthampton works around weather for fireworks

By CATHERINE BAUM
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EASTHAMPTON - Fireworks lit up the sky before the lightning Saturday, resulting in a shorter but more intense show than previous years.

Despite forecasted thunderstorms Saturday and Sunday, the Easthampton Fireworks Festival's rain date, organizers believed that the show could go on Saturday, said Eric Snyder, executive director of the Greater Easthampton Chamber of Commerce.

"Tonight was the typical weather report," Snyder said, watching the country band Cottonwood perform on Gailbraith Field. "There's always the threat of a thunderstorm, so we have faith the people are going to come. We want to provide a good time."

Last year was the first year the show was canceled because of bad weather, he said. This year's show, marking the event's 35th year, started and ended earlier to avoid incoming thunderstorms. The Fire Department requested the changes with public safety in mind, Snyder said.

About 15,000 to 20,000 people came out to see the display, listen to The Lynyrd Skynyrd Experience, Cottonwood and UnionJack bands and snack on vendors' delights.

"You don't see a blade of grass here - it's covered with people," said Gino Orlandi, owner of the Cummington-based Poppies concessions.

Daley and Galbraith fields were topped with blankets, lawn chairs and umbrellas. People danced to music, had their faces painted and climbed a rock wall. The air smelled of fried dough and french fries. The scenes were colored with balloons, Frisbees and footballs.

"This is one of the best shows; I see them all," said Orlandi, who's worked the event for 30 years.

Easthampton resident and musician Steve Ostrowski said he made it a point to attend the event this year, having missed previous years because of other gigs with his band.

"It's the thing to do if you live in Easthampton," he said. "They usually outdo themselves every year."

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Members of the Garfield and Emmett families are illuminated by "light sabers" while waiting for the fireworks to begin Saturday at the Easthampton Fireworks Festival. Originally of Easthampton, the families now live in Westfield and Indian Orchard.



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For many families, the fireworks are a tradition. An Easthampton resident for 38 years, Brenda Gendron has attended each show since the early 1990s.

"You get such an uplifting feeling being around people who respect our country," said Gendron, dressed in a heart-shaped flag T-shirt. "There's a strong bond with the people around you."

Emily Krzanowski, 78, said four generations in her family have attended the show. She recalls taking her children when they were younger.

"It's a tribute to all the armed forces," she said. Being with family is "why I love it every year."

Krzanowski's favorite part is the end.

"Sometimes it brings tears to your eyes," she said.

The event cost about \$28,000, said John Atwater, a member of the Easthampton and Southampton Kiwanis, which supports local recreation, school and community programs. Atwater noted the club's goal was to collect between \$5,000 and \$10,000 in donations Saturday.

"This is our major fundraiser," he said.

Main Street Service came in handy Saturday morning when the 28-foot box truck and trailer full of fireworks got stuck in mud 6 inches deep in the White Brook Middle School field.

"It helps we're so active in the community. ... We have friends that can help," Atwater said.

Fireworks were purchased for a discount from Atlas Fireworks in Jaffrey, N.H., set to put on about 20 shows for the Fourth of July this weekend.

Twenty-five police officers and 10 emergency responders patrolled the event.

Police Sgt. Dominic Serino said there were no arrests at the show Saturday, though there was one arrest before the event and two arrests following the event.

The arrests were for disturbances and domestic violence, with reports to be completed today, Serino said.

Traffic was the biggest challenge Saturday, taking nearly two hours to clear, said police Capt. Donald Emerson. "The end of the night's a nightmare," he said.

Some spectators were pleased with the intensity of the fireworks, while others were disappointed with the shorter duration of the show.

"They were kind of quick," said Martha Noonan, of Chicopee, as she waited in traffic to leave Saturday.

Jennifer Mapstone, of Virginia Beach, said she was glad she went.

"I thought they were beautiful," she said.

Local volunteers were out on the field Sunday morning at 6 to clean up the debris.

"The most important thing is getting this back the way it was 10 hours ago," Snyder said.

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