



DESCRIPTION

Orange County Parks and Recreation, with promotional and logistical support from Orange County Tourism, hosted the Inaugural Liberty Ride on Saturday, September 22, 2012. The event was co-sponsored by the County of Orange, Montpelier, Oakland Heights Farms, and the Virginia Horse Industry Board, as well as outstanding support from local individuals and businesses. The Liberty Ride was a horseback ride and wagon drive from Oakland Heights Farm to Montpelier for lunch and back to benefit the newly-formed Orange County Parks and Recreation Foundation. The event was also part of Montpelier's Constitution Day festivities.

There were 66 participants with 70 horses from all over Virginia, West Virginia, and North Carolina. Special guests included Delegate Ed Scott, Orange County Supervisor Jim White, Miss Rodeo Virginia Lindsay Harper and longtime Orange resident and equestrian, Diana Dodge. The riders were treated to magnificent views as they traveled over Chicken Mountain and into James Madison's Montpelier. Much of this trail was traveled by Madison and Jefferson many years ago in their commutes between Montpelier and Monticello. James and Dolly Madison interpreters joined the ride for the trip to the mansion and addressed a crowd of visitors upon arrival. Riders then enjoyed a barbecue lunch at no additional cost, and returned to Oakland Heights Farm across the same route.

The event was made possible by a grant from the Virginia Horse Industry Board and the collaboration of many others. Piedmont Power supplied ATV's for transporting supplies and a camera crew. When organizers ran into issues regarding closing roads, the adjoining land owners all gladly gave permission for The Ride to go across pasture land instead. Many local businesses also supported the event by purchasing Welcome and Thank You signs.

The Orange County Parks and Recreation Foundation is a 501c3, non-profit that will help fund future significant Parks and Recreation projects in Orange County, as well as vision possible programs for the Department. The Foundation began operation on January 1, 2013, and is an avenue for individuals and businesses to donate for specific projects in the County.



CHALLENGES

The creation of trails is a goal that has much support from the community in Orange County, especially the horse community. However, in order to attain this goal, creative funding sources needed to be found. To that end, the creation of the Orange County Parks & Recreation Foundation allowed citizens to make tax deductible donations to specific projects, and allowed greater flexibility when applying for grants. To kick start the Orange County Parks & Recreation Foundation, the Liberty Ride was envisioned as an inaugural fundraiser for the Foundation, with all proceeds being earmarked for future trail development. In addition to providing funds, the Ride had the benefit of increasing the visibility of the new foundation.

The Liberty Ride itself posed a number of challenges. Funding needed to be derived from grants and sponsorships. Roads potentially needed closing. Finally, the organizers had to get the word out to diverse groups of individuals all interested in the horse industry.

To gain an initial working budget, a Virginia Horse Industry Board grant was applied for and received. This gave the organizers \$3,000 to begin the development of the Liberty Ride. This grant would serve as the foundation for the ride's development, but it would not be sufficient or applicable for all of the expenses that would be involved, which posed another hurdle. To raise additional funding, a sponsorship campaign was undertaken. Prospective sponsors had the ability to purchase "Welcome" and "Thank You" signs for display on the ride. The total income from these sponsorships gave the organizers an additional \$575 to help cover expenses that could not be funded through the grant.

To get the word out about the event while not extinguishing funds, as many grassroots methods as possible were utilized to get the most return on investment. Facebook groups were contacted, flyers were distributed at key horse industry locations, information was distributed to stables and horse industry establishments statewide and beyond through email, and agreements with the local newspaper allowed for small scale cost-free information distribution. However, it was important to both "brand" the Ride and attract participants from key horse areas such as Northern Virginia. To this end, the Orange County Department of Tourism created a logo and placed advertisements in publications like *Recreation News* and *Arrive* (Amtrak's on-train magazine).



With funding and promotion under control, the next set of challenges emerged as planning commenced. The ride was to begin at Oakland Heights Farm, and continue to James Madison's Montpelier during their Constitution Day celebrations. Initially, the Ride was planned to travel down one lane of Route 15 North in Orange County and turn onto Chicken Mountain Road to enter a back gate at James Madison's Montpelier. However, this would require the Ride to go against the flow of traffic while on Route 15, potentially spooking horses. Additionally, discussions with the Virginia Department of Transportation made it clear that to close this lane would be prohibitive both in terms of cost and logistics. To tackle this challenge, the route was revised. It would now cross pasture land and wooded trails (roughly parallel to Route 15) to exit onto Chicken Mountain Road. To this end, several landowners were contacted, and permission was received to cross their land. To accomplish all of this, partnerships between several groups were developed both intentionally and organically. The partnership with James Madison's Montpelier allowed for logistical planning and support on their grounds. The partnership with the Virginia Horse Industry Board allowed for funding and promotional support. However, the numerous volunteers who assisted with all aspects of the event made a contribution equal to any other. The Orange County Department of Parks & Recreation, as well as the Orange County Department of Tourism, did not enjoy a surplus of staff. In fact, the two departments combined total 3 staff. While sufficient for planning, the need to have several points of contact throughout the ride meant that more individuals were needed. This need increased the importance of the volunteers. The owners and staff of Oakland Heights Farm assisted with the operation of the Ride in addition to volunteering their property as its starting point. Horse industry individuals assisted with the promotional campaign by distributing flyers, spreading the information word of mouth, seeking sponsors, as well as assisting during the Ride by opening gates and keeping it together. Without the cooperation of the Orange County staff, the several partner organizations, landowners, and horse industry volunteers, the Ride would not have been nearly as successful.

The review of the Ride indicated that it was indeed very successful. A total of 66 participants and 70 horses were involved, and the ride raised nearly \$1,500 for the Orange County Parks & Recreation Foundation that is earmarked for future trail development. The cooperation mentioned above allowed for creative problem solving, and helped to set the precedent and contact structure that will be necessary to develop our future trails. To judge the participant experience, follow-up surveys were sent out with a pre-



paid return envelope to each participant. The results reinforced what the planners had hoped. Out of all the surveys, no one responded as “unsatisfied,” “completely unsatisfied,” or “unfavorably” in any question. In fact, 50% of responders indicated the Liberty Ride compared favorably against other trail rides they had participated in, 25% indicated it was comparable, while the remaining 25% indicated it was either their first ride (so they had no comparison) or they did not respond. These data indicate the Ride was very positively received.

MODEL

The 2012 Liberty Ride can serve as an example for other localities. Many rural counties encounter similar challenges in the planning of an event. They often enjoy fairly large areas of beautiful open space between population centers/government offices, but limited staffing, which creates a logistical challenge when planning events. Time constraints and limited agents make travel between important points problematic both during the promotion of the event and especially during the execution of the event, since it requires taking staff away from centers of planning and sometimes out of contact. This makes outreach to interested parties in the locality critical; their assistance as a volunteer base and their extended network of contacts diminishes the spatial constraint. It is the responsibility of the staff to make sure relevant parties understand the importance of the goal and the important role they can play. The value of the word of mouth spread from the proper sources, with the proper information, has only increased with the growth of social media. It cannot be overvalued. To summarize, partnerships are key, and should be the starting point.

Funding can sometimes be a problem for these localities as well, making grant funding important and sponsorships crucial. Every locality knows the growing importance of grant funding, but this is not always applied to events, nor are all potential sources always discovered. Outside of federal funding, many interest groups exist at the state and national levels which have grant programs to fund events and programs that fall into their niche and/or would promote its public attention. These sources may or may not pan out for various reasons, but stopping at a federal government search is like leaving money on the table. If these grants do not pan out or are not available, the sponsorship becomes even more important. Perhaps corporate entities will be willing to help fund the program or event, but the Liberty Ride proves that sponsorship funding from small businesses is equally viable. Of our sponsorships, many were local



small businesses, and others were local offices backed by larger corporations. To gain the confidence and sponsorship of these local businesses, the network of contacts and volunteers that has already been established becomes important once again.

Finally, to make the event memorable and encourage repeat participation, the planners of the Liberty Ride emphasized a few points. Though there was a registration fee, it was reasonable within the realm of the horse industry. The souvenir buttons served the double purpose of both providing a token of the event and the practical function of making sure that each participant had filled out all required forms and waivers. The buttons were only handed out at the completion of all registration and payment, making the mundane process of registration a little more rewarding. The lunches at James Madison's Montpelier were purchased through the grant and provided at no additional cost to the participant. The key message of these examples is the lack of additional fees. The single, reasonable, registration fee kept complications to a minimum and contributed to making the experience more enjoyable. Surveying participants allows for better understanding from all angles, and a better experience year after year.

The planners and staff of Orange County hope the example of the Liberty Ride will be of use to other localities. It was a fun event for participants as well as organizers, and we look forward to it this year.