

Motorcycle rally draws BMW enthusiasts to Salem

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Mayor Anna Peterson gets a short test ride from Chris Hughes, from Spokane, Wash., during the first day of the BMW Motorcycle Owners of America Association rally at the Oregon State Fairgrounds on Thursday, July 18, 2013. Organizers are expecting over 5000 riders the three day event.

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test ride from Chris Hughes during the first day of the BMW Motorcycle Owners of America Association rally at the Oregon State Fairgrounds on Thursday,. Organizers are expecting more than 5,000 riders to attend the three-day event. / TIMOTHY J. GONZALEZ / Statesman Journal

If you're noticing an usual number of BMW motorcycle cruising in the Mid-Willamette Valley this weekend, it's because thousands are gathering for the BMW Motorcycle of America's annual International Rally in Salem through Saturday.

Shortly after arriving at the State Fairgrounds on Thursday afternoon, Salem Mayor Anna Peterson was welcomed by Bob Aldridge, the association's executive director.

He listened to Peterson give a quick rundown of her previous experiences on motorcycles and then responded: "We're going to put you on a *real* motorcycle now; take you for a ride around the fairgrounds."

The group's marketing director, Chris Hughes, rolled up and Peterson hopped on a sleek, smooth-riding and relatively quiet bike to tour the grounds during the early stages of the International Rally.

The visitors on two wheels are part of the 32,000-member contingent that started rolling into the State Fairgrounds at 9 a.m. Thursday; organizers had been on site since Sunday evening following the Marion County Fair preparing for the event.

Many Thursday arrivals checked in and then set out to absorb the sights of the Willamette Valley. The rally draws riders from all stretches of North America and beyond. The private event runs through Saturday and is expected to see more than 5,500 riders cruise through.

Many have bivouacked on the grounds, while those who reserved rooms have booked up local lodging.

“They’re full — 100 percent full,” Travel Salem President Angie Morris said of local rooms.

Kara Kuh, Travel Salem’s public relations manager, noted that the club’s International Rally routinely generates \$4 million to \$6 million revenue in the cities where it is held.

Aldridge said area residents will likely see small groups of riders who hail from far-flung points of the continent taking in local and regional sights and destinations.

“We’ll have riders from (all) states, Mexico and Canada,” Aldridge said, noting the rally also draws a few riders who ship in from overseas. “There are some who ride up to Alaska and then come down to the rally, just because it’s an opportunity to see it.