

# Total solar eclipse offers small towns a tourism boom — if they can get ready

## HIGHLIGHTS

Small towns like Lathrop, Mo., will offer the best and longest views of the eclipse on Aug. 21, 2017

Volunteers in those towns are struggling to arrange viewing sites and logistics

What happens if you're planning for 1,000 visitors but 10,000 show up? Or vice versa?



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At the site of the future home of the Baptist Church of Lathrop in Lathrop, Mo., Cindy Weers (center) of the 150th anniversary and eclipse planning committee held a mirror reflecting the sun as the town of 2,200 residents prepares for the Aug. 21, 2017, total solar eclipse that will pass directly over Lathrop. From left to right are Ava Langner, Vicki Shrewsbury, Nelson Hayes, Weers, Debbie Nelsen and Coetta Whiteley. **David Eulitt** - [deulitt@kcstar.com](mailto:deulitt@kcstar.com)

BY RUTH SERVEN  
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LATHROP, MO. — This small town is preparing to celebrate its 150th anniversary, but it turns out the main attraction of the weekend will be astronomy.

Lathrop will be a great place to watch the total solar eclipse on Aug. 21, 2017, which is the same weekend as its anniversary.

Small towns like Lathrop, 40 miles north of Kansas City, are smack dab on the “path of totality,” a narrow line arcing across Missouri and a corner of Kansas that offers the best and longest views of the eclipse.

Bigger towns like St. Joseph and Columbia along the path can dedicate time and resources to planning for the eclipse, but volunteers in smaller towns are struggling to arrange viewing sites and logistics for what could be either a tourism boom or a disaster.

What, for example, happens if you’re planning for 1,000 visitors but 10,000 show up? Or what if you plan for 10,000, but it’s cloudy, and they all head off for a sunnier view? Or what happens to drivers when the roads suddenly go dark for three minutes?

Or should Debbie Nelsen, who owns land next to a proposed viewing site in Lathrop, plant beans instead of corn? After all, tall corn stalks might obstruct views of the eclipse.

No one in Lathrop, which has a high school, a few churches and horseshoes painted down the middle of its downtown street, has ever tried to plan anything like this before, but residents all have ideas.

An anniversary and eclipse planning committee, which includes Nelsen, has already ordered T-shirts and eclipse glasses. Then there’s the traffic, fences, bathrooms, water and emergency stations to work out.

(The T-shirts have a horseshoe — Lathrop was, after all, once known as mule capital of the world — surrounded by an eclipse.)

Everyone on the committee is donating their time and corralling their community to get on board for the anniversary and eclipse.

One wants to host a hog roast in her yard. Another is asking her sister to let RVs park on her property. They have visions for a wedding chapel. They’re trying to involve nearby libraries, schools and churches in the planning.

Standing in a grassy field that’s the future home of First Baptist Church, Cindy Weers, chairwoman of the committee, looked out over surrounding acres. She sees bean fields, corn fields, horse pastures — potential viewing sites for visitors.

Lathrop should be a perfect eclipse viewing spot, with low horizons and one of the longest durations of towns along the path of totality. Weers envisions the fields filled with eclipse chasers and tourists. She’s been told to expect anywhere from 1,000 to 10,000 people.

“It’s hard to fathom that many people,” she said. “It’s hard to get your hands around how many people will actually show up. Who knows?”

Weers grew up in Lathrop, and her family has a history with the town and its mule industry. She's hoping that the eclipse and the 150th anniversary will give the town a chance to take pride in that history and bring back families that have scattered across the country.

For now, the committee has lots of ideas but hasn't decided how to put them all in place.

"We have a lot of things started, but we need help," Weers said. "We'll take advice from anyone who will give it because this is a really big deal for us."

The best places to see the total eclipse are within a 70-mile-wide band that includes towns such as Liberty, Sedalia, Boonville, Cuba, Sullivan and St. Clair. Almost 200 million Americans live within a day's drive of that band's track across the whole country.

But the best spots to watch will be along the path of totality, and astronomical societies are warning towns and communities along the path to prepare for thousands of visitors.

Across Missouri, towns are beginning to plan events and take reservations.

Rick Henderson, president of the Astronomical Society of Kansas City, is planning an event at St. Joseph's Rosecrans Memorial Airport that will bring in international astronomers and 20,000 people or more. Hotels, especially bed-and-breakfasts, began receiving calls for reservations years ago.

St. Joseph and Lathrop are favored spots only if the weather cooperates, though. Depending on the forecast, eclipse chasers may end up driving to different towns across the state for a perfect view.

"Diehards will be glued to their phones to see where the sky is clear," Henderson said. "In the Midwest, weather is always uncertain."

The hunt for a perfect spot should be worth it because a total eclipse is an awe-inspiring event. During a total solar eclipse, the moon blocks the sun and turns daytime into darkness.

Henderson has seen one total eclipse before. His voice took on a tone of wonder as he described it — the world at twilight, the stars out, birds chirping and a breeze in the trees.

The Kansas City and St. Louis astronomical societies are holding information sessions for chambers of commerce and tourism boards across the state to give authorities a heads-up and help prepare for what might turn into a major tourism boom.

Those in small towns who know about the eclipse are now contacting local authorities and beginning to plan lodging, traffic and safety.

James Schmieder, assistant city administrator for Union, which is farther east along the path of totality, is organizing his town's plans. He's also a member of the St. Louis eclipse task force.

Schmieder said that he has always loved astronomy and that headaches about coordinating traffic, school closings and lodging for the weekend will be worth it.

"This is literally a once-in-a-lifetime event," he said. "These are great problems to have."

Union's local hotel still has rooms available, but he's heard rumblings of full bookings in nearby towns. Schmieder has already talked to local police and emergency services to plan for the weekend, but he's not trying to pin any plans down too tightly.

"You have to be flexible," he said. "With this stuff, it's like nailing Jell-O to a wall."

Farther east, Perry County has been putting together its eclipse plan since last October. The rural county south of St. Louis has a population of about 19,000 and is expecting that population to double on Aug. 21, 2017.

The head of the eclipse task force, Trish Erzfeld, said her team has been thinking in terms of natural disaster planning — she has agencies such as the police, fire, hospital, highway patrol and sheriff's departments running through every contingency plan.

Erzfeld isn't just trying to help visitors have a comfortable stay in the county that weekend. She is trying to make it as easy as possible for them to visit in the first place, whether by letting visitors with their own planes fly into the county airport or by helping them book hotels in St. Louis and arranging for a charter bus down to Perryville.

She is also expecting a lot of visitors to camp out at local parks and wineries. Like other rural parts of the state, Perry County wants to capitalize on the influx of visitors and tourist dollars.

Erzfeld will meet throughout the year with local authorities and with other communities that want advice on planning their own eclipse events. But once Erzfeld has her plans finalized, she'll have to wait and see how it all plays out.

"It's not like a county fair or a football game," she said. "When you talk about a total eclipse going across the whole U.S., there's no playbook or tutorial. It's unfolding, and you have to work it out as you go."

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Thanks for this well-written article on the 2017 eclipse. Note that a partial eclipse will be seen everywhere in the U.S. on August 21, 2017, not just within the path of totality as was stated in the story. To view a partial eclipse (and the partial stages of a total eclipse), you MUST use special eclipse glasses to prevent permanent damage to your eyes.

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