

www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/ct-met-charity-walks-20130928,0,6607716.story

chicagotribune.com

Chicago nearly overrun by charity races, walks

No one's complaining about the revenue, though, as city, suburbs get permit fees, tourism boosts

By Vikki Ortiz Healy, Chicago Tribune reporter

September 28, 2013

When organizers for a hip, multicity 5K run approached the Chicago Sport and Social Club about advertisement bringing the event to the city's lakefront earlier this month, Jason Erkes knew it could be a challenge.

Erkes, the social club's president, didn't doubt that thousands of participants would sign up for the Electric Run — a 3.1-mile nighttime dash on a darkened course lit only with glow devices. But with a lakefront already bustling with walks, runs and bike rides each weekend, would there be room for one more?

"Truly, the problem these days is it's hard to find a course and a weekend to even bring and launch a new event," said Erkes, whose club eventually found space alongside McCormick Place, where about 8,000 runners lit up a path Sept. 6 to raise money for Special Olympics Chicago.

From well-established walks for national charities to novelty races that draw hundreds dressed as Mike Ditka or covered in spray paint, weekend mornings can become a traffic jam of competing causes on public walkways in Chicago and the suburbs.

The number of walks, runs and bike rides in Chicago has grown from 115 in 2005 to 250 so far this year, leaving Park District staff scrambling to keep all those walkers and runners out of each other's way, officials said. And then all those trash cans filled with energy drink cups have to be emptied after the crowds depart.

Event organizers typically pay the Park District anywhere from \$365 to \$12,000 for a daily event, money that is part of \$9.7 million raised through permit fees in 2013, said Jessica Maxey-Faulkner, spokeswoman for the district.

In the suburbs, similar spikes have been reported in the number of charity events in communities such as Aurora and Joliet, where officials welcome the tourism and boost to the local economy.

"You can feel the difference," said Dan Ferrelli, spokesman for Aurora, where organized walks and runs increased from 13 in 2012 to 21 this year. "Certainly it's something that the city has worked on for a lot of years."

And as Chicago-area residents keep their sneakers handy in September — the busiest month for these events —

sponsors say the local activity mirrors what is happening across the country. As running has boomed, technology has made organizing such events easier; at the same time, millennials have demonstrated a tendency to support charities in ways that go beyond writing checks, organizers say.

"Every city has tons (of such events). It's just impossible to get your arms around it," said David Hessekiel, president of the Run Walk Ride Fundraising Council in New York, which advises nonprofits on how to set up charity events.

"It's reflective of what's going on in our society as technology allows citizen activists to make an impact in a way that previously only a professional organization could," he said.

When the sport of running boomed in the early 1970s, it largely appealed to hard-core runners, many inspired by Olympic gold medal winner Frank Shorter or by other professional athletes. In addition to competitive marathons and half-marathons, some of the best-known athletic events that raised money for charities were established during that era — from the March of Dimes March for Babies to the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure, researchers said.

But after Oprah Winfrey did her first marathon in 1994, many Americans started to consider running an activity everyone could enjoy, said Ryan Lamppa, researcher for Running USA, a national nonprofit for the running industry based in Colorado Springs, Colo.

Soon after, the Internet helped people to join running groups and discover running programs. Since then, charities big and small have learned that tapping into the interest — and using online technology to keep it organized — is an effective way to raise money, Lamppa said.

Three years ago in Westmont, Jennifer Broucek and her colleagues at the Chicago Prostate Cancer Center were brainstorming how to raise money and awareness when they decided to put the center's big parking lot and surrounding streets to good use. With the village's blessing, the center now holds an annual 3K walk/5K run for former patients and family members. On Sept. 8, 263 walkers helped raise \$26,000, Broucek said.

"This is our thing, and we're really hoping to make it grow," she said. "It's kind of like a celebration, and you can make it a nice family morning."

Similarly, in Joliet, Tim Harrison started a walk to honor a friend killed in a car accident in 2011. Last year the Theresa Lang Memorial 5K raised about \$4,000 that organizers said was donated to Lang's family. This year the event raised nearly \$3,000, which will be turned over to the Wounded Warrior Project.

"It's kind of a social event as opposed to just cutting a check to a church or something," Harrison said. "People see that this is a way to do things to raise money and to honor someone and sometimes do both."

Another event in Joliet will debut Saturday, with at least 100 people signed up for the Grand Prairie's Run For Your Life 5K Run/Walk. The race, organized by a local parent who participates in charity runs as often as four times a month, will raise money for Grand Prairie Elementary School.

"Because I know how popular the races are, I asked the PTO if they thought this would be a good idea," said Amy Henderson, the race director. "We're hoping to do this the last weekend in September every year."

Hessekiel, of the Run Walk Ride Fundraising Council, said this type of fundraising — known as "third-party

fundraising" — represents one of the biggest areas of growth as independent groups partner with charities and turn over a portion of the proceeds.

So far this year, the approach has brought at least six races involving electric or glow themes to Chicago's public paths, officials say. Still coming are runs with Halloween themes, ugly sweater dress codes, even a Ditka Dash 5K, where each participant gets a fake mustache and pair of aviator sunglasses, said Anne Davis, sports development coordinator for the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events.

Despite the extra work these events create for city staff, they bring in additional revenue through license fees, Park District officials note. Groups that leave excessive messes or damage property are fined.

"This is certainly a busy time for us," said Alonzo Williams, director of revenue for the Chicago Park District. "But that's a good thing. The events on the lakefront bring in revenues, which support programs and capital improvements at neighborhood parks throughout the city."

Ferrelli, in Aurora, said event organizers are required to pay for such community services as police presence and trash removal.

Beth Standish, who operates a stand at the Aurora Farmers Market, appreciates the effort, which leads to all those customers showing up on Saturdays in matching T-shirts.

"We noticed like tons and tons of people coming through that we wouldn't normally see," Standish said. "It's definitely bringing business in."

vortiz@tribune.com

Copyright © 2013 Chicago Tribune Company, LLC