



## Signature Events a Year-Round Boon to NM Tourism and Commerce

*By Jason Gibbs, Finance New Mexico*

Big or small, signature events not only provide a burst of income for New Mexico municipalities, they make an impression that lasts throughout the year and keep tourists coming back.

From smaller communities like Carlsbad to the metros of Albuquerque and Las Cruces, annual events are a valuable tool when developing an image and showcasing regional attractions, leaving guests with a positive impression and encouraging return visits outside the week or two the event is in play.

The Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta is, perhaps, the granddaddy of signature events in the state. The 46th edition of the event, held in 2017, drew an estimated 887,970 guests over the nine-day event. The [2018 AIBF](#), scheduled for Oct. 6-14, 2018, is expected to have similar if not greater attendance.

Tom Garrity, the fiesta's media director, points to an independent survey which shows the 2017 gathering included roughly 211,300 Albuquerque residents and 572,000 guests from out of state.

The event had a total economic impact of nearly \$173 million on Metro-Albuquerque's businesses, according to the study. Beyond private businesses, the event pumped an estimated \$5.7 million into state coffers, \$3.5 million for the city of Albuquerque and \$826,735 for Bernalillo County.

Garrity said a key to success is that events reflect the brand of the community because visitors want unique, authentic experiences.

"Roswell and UFOs, Hatch and green chile, Spanish Market at Santa Fe – those are just a few events that reflect something authentic about the community and enhance their brand," Garrity said.

Las Cruces has seen quick expansion of a younger signature event, the [Las Cruces Country Music Festival](#). Having wrapped up its fifth year downtown in 2017, the event has grown to the point it will move locations and dates in 2018 to accommodate larger crowds, said Chris Faivre, director of marketing for Visit Las Cruces.

The 2018 event will be held Oct. 19-21 at the Hadley Sports Complex which will accommodate roughly 2,000 more attendees above the sold-out 5,000-per-night seen the past couple of years. It will also help the event evolve into more of a music festival atmosphere, Faivre said.

"One of the reasons we did the music festival is that other signature events like The Whole Enchilada Fiesta were moving on," Faivre said. "In focus groups, people talked about signature events and associated them with Las Cruces, and organizers knew marketing a signature event usually takes place over a six-month period, all promoting the city as well as the event."

Organizers estimate the economic impact of the 2017 event, for both overnight and single-day attendees, reached \$911,880, with \$54,924 in tax revenue for the city. The hope is those numbers will be augmented when the estimated 10,730 guests take advantage of other tourism opportunities in the region.

"We hope they will see everything else we have and will come back in six months," Faivre said. "It really is a way for people to see what your community has to offer beyond the event."

Smaller events can be successful as well, said Lisa Boeke, tourism director of the Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce, which helps organize that city's [Christmas on the Pecos](#). The event, which began in 1991 with one boat and only a few departures each evening, now starts the Friday after Thanksgiving and runs through Dec. 31, with the exception of Christmas Eve.

The event generally sells out, especially on weekends. Last year's run sold more than 15,000 tickets and has a lasting impact throughout the year, she said.

"Christmas on the Pecos greatly affects our community, not only during the season but for months following the event. Visitors eat at local restaurants, stay in hotels, visit other area attractions, buy gas and other merchandise throughout town," Boeke said. "We have heard several people say that they did not realize how much there was to see and do in Carlsbad. They come back during the warmer months to experience our river and other outdoor attractions as well as the Caverns."

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