

Pandemic forces suspension of Ashland-Guanajuato exchanges

by Kernan Turner for the Tidings
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Guanajuato's summer festivals queen, Andrea Marina Maldonado, rides in the 2019 Ashland Fourth of July Parade. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced cancellation of the parade this year. Amigo Club photo.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reduced sister-city exchanges between Ashland and Guanajuato, Mexico, especially after the suspension of two traditional summertime celebrations: Ashland's Fourth of July and the Guanajuato festivals of San Juan and Presa de la Olla.

Ashland city officials and two high school ambassadors have traditionally attended the Guanajuato festivals in June.

The following month, a Guanajuato official delegation that included the summer festival queen would participate in Independence Day celebrations in Ashland and ride in the popular Chamber of Commerce parade.

The chamber has canceled the Fourth of July parade and fireworks display.

Chamber Executive Director Sandra Slattery said the Independence Day celebration was “a casualty of the state’s latest set of COVID-19 recovery guidelines” and the governor’s restrictions banning large events until the end of September.

Ashland Amigo Club President Betzabé “Mina” Turner said sister city cancellations were “disappointing for the club because we always look forward to actively participating in the summer celebrations.”

She added, “Of course we recognize that even though things are opening up, the pandemic is far from over.”

As she’s done for 50 years, “Señora Chela” Tapp-Kocks, the club founder and current board member, would normally be helping choose two high school girls as ambassadors to the Guanajuato festivities, coaching their song-and-dance routines and speeches, and accompanying them and city officials to Guanajuato near the end of June.

Those plans have been suspended.

“Health conditions are not right for holding parties,” Guanajuato Mayor Alejandro Navarro Saldaña said in announcing suspension of the Guanajuato festivals. “Such celebrations bring together a high number of people, creating the potential for coronavirus pandemic infections.”

The San Juan (St. John the Baptist) Festival has for 270 years commemorated the city’s patron saint.

Traditionally, some 2,000 celebrants gather in the park at the Presa de la Olla (Pot Dam) in the days leading up to June 24, the saint's feast day. A few days later, celebrants return to the park to witness the opening of the dam's floodgates, a tradition initiated in the 18th century to cleanse the reservoir. The suspended festivals would have included music, dancing, fireworks and a variety of artistic and cultural activities.

Navarro Saldaña noted that other events have been canceled during the pandemic, including the popular "Day of the Flowers" in April, when floral arrangements would have decorated residential balconies, private patios, parks and public buildings in the cobblestoned historic district, recognized since 1988 as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In other pandemic-affected sister-city functions:

- Campus closures at Southern Oregon University and the University of Guanajuato in March kept exchange students from the Ashland campus of the Oregon Health and Science University School of Nursing from spending three weeks in Guanajuato in April and May. Six University of Guanajuato nursing students visited Ashland and Medford last year as part of the 5-year-old exchange arrangement.
- The fifth annual Sister City Little League Classic was postponed until next year. Twelve players accompanied by their parents and coach Bruce Lawrence had planned to be in Guanajuato in March.
- Guanajuato University exchange student Saul Isaac Sanchez Flores, 21, was studying mechatronics engineering at Southern Oregon University with an Amigo Club scholarship when the campus shut down in March. He opted to stay in Ashland and keep connected to his classes by computer to complete a full year of study at SOU. He has booked a June 13 flight home to Mexico.

Amigo Club's Entre Amigos (Between Friends) column about Ashland ties to its sister city Guanajuato, Mexico, appears on the third Tuesday of each month. Longtime AP reporter and bureau chief Kernan Turner is an Ashland resident and Amigo Club member.