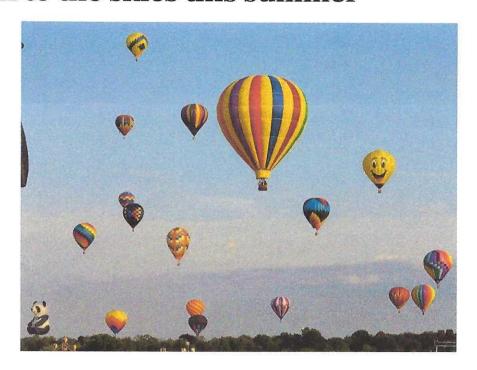March 25, 2021

N.J.'s giant hot air balloon festival on track to return to the skies this summer

By Caroline Fassett | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

The big balloons are coming back.

After being postponed and then canceled last year due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the 38th annual New Jersey Lottery Festival of Ballooning is scheduled to return this July.

The event, which bills itself as the largest summertime hot air balloon and music festival in North America, will take place as planned from July 23 through July 25 at the Solberg Airport in Readington Township.

Howard Freeman, the executive producer of the festival, said the event will follow any COVID-19 guidelines and protocols enforced by the state, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other local agencies come July.

"After the Pandemic of 1918 came the 'Roaring Twenties', and if early sales are any indication, we expect a similar reaction this summer with people wanting to be outdoors, enjoying themselves and safely spending time with their friends and families," Freeman said in a release shared with NJ Advance Media. "The size and openness of Solberg Airport allows us to produce a safe environment to hold the Festival and produce the lifelong memories people have come to enjoy."

Alternative rock group Barenaked Ladies has been tapped to headline the festival's Saturday evening concert, and classic rock group Styx is set to perform on Sunday afternoon. Additional performers and entertainment will be announced soon, according to the release.

New special-shaped hot air balloons appearing this year include a colorful unicorn and a giant sloth. More special balloons will be announced as the festival draws closer.

The 2019 balloon festival drew a record crowd of about 169,500 people and contributed roughly $52.4 million to the state's economy, according to festival organizers.

Advance tickets are available now on the festival's website.

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