

Fireworks display loses WPCC home

By STACY PETERSON
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If you are one of the estimated 25,000 people who travel each year to the campus of Western Piedmont Community College for the annual July 4th fireworks celebration — it's time to change your plans.

The fireworks show, which some say is the largest in western North Carolina, will have to find a new firing line following a decision by WPCC on May 19 to discontinue hosting the July 4th festivities.

Since the college's 20th anniversary in 1984, the summer fireworks have become a traditional part of the school year, said WPCC President Jim Richardson.

However, with the addition of more buildings to the campus, Richardson said the college is no longer able to handle the crowds.

Richardson said that consideration, along with concern about traffic safety due to the proximity to Interstate 40, led to the decision to stop hosting the event.

"The fireworks have become a tradition," Richardson said this morning. "But the Highway Patrol has told us it's a major problem. It's just too large for us... we just can't accommodate that number."

Richardson said the college regrets not hosting the Independence Day celebration, but says he is hopeful that an alternate location will be available.

Richardson suggested that the

celebration could be held at Freedom Park or the Burke County Fairgrounds.

"I think there are other facilities in town that can be used," Richardson said. "We hate to see it leave, but we're just not big enough."

Lizette Lampe, director of public relations at WPCC, says the decision is also based on warnings from the N.C. Highway Patrol.

"The Trustees of Western Piedmont Community College regret to ask the Chamber of Commerce to schedule another location," Lampe said. "Sgt. Jackson from the Highway Patrol has informed us that traffic actually stops, and that is unacceptable for a main artery of I-40. It's dangerous to holiday travelers who use Interstate 40."

So will Burke County have a July 4 fireworks show this year?

Chamber of Commerce President Mike Jackson says "yes!"

"There will be some type of fireworks display on the Fourth of July," Jackson said. "We don't want to downgrade the show at all. We are in the process of finding an alternate location."

Jackson said the show may have to change, or may have to be smaller, depending on the location.

He said fundraising efforts have already begun and the down payment on the fireworks had already been paid when WPCC announced its decision.

Please turn to Page Three

Fireworks

From Page One

"It came as a shock and a surprise," Jackson said. "We were probably as surprised as anyone that they pulled the plug on us. And at this late date, if we would have known we would have planned it differently."

Jackson said the Table Rock Shooters, the local organization that operates the fireworks show, has informed the fireworks company of the change, and added that the order can be changed if the show has to change.

The Chamber of Commerce Executive Committee will meet Tuesday, May 27, and a decision as to the new location could be announced as early as next week.

Each year, the City of Morganton Recreation Department, the Chamber of Commerce and area vendors work together to plan the July 4 celebration, and Jackson said plans are continuing.

Larry Clark, president of the Table Rock Shooters could not be reached for comment by press time this morning.