

Upgrades promised for Liberty Bowl

Criticism flowed after Southern Heritage Classic

By David Williams

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Blistering criticisms of Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium have gotten the city's attention.

Some Southern Heritage Classic fans, as well as presenting sponsor FedEx, cited traffic, parking, stadium cleanliness and other issues from the Sept. 16 football game.

Game founder Fred Jones released correspondence from several fans, including one citing "dirty bathrooms, a filthy stadium, terrible traffic jams, cars that were broken into ... "

City Park Services director Cindy Buchanan said some issues already have been resolved through cleaning and repairs, new plans are being developed, and stadium upgrades are on the way.

"We're not there just to run the ball game and whatever happens, happens," she said. "We're there to make sure people have a good experience.

"It's all about customer service. Having said that, you know that our staff is very limited. So we are trying to be creative."

Buchanan, in an e-mail to a disgruntled fan, outlined improvement plans and changes to come for the 2007 game:

"Traffic police will be arriving 5 hours before the kick off, rather than 2 hours, so that traffic can be moved before it bottlenecks.

"By the 2007 season, a major restroom renovation on the lower concourse will provide upgraded restrooms, with new lighting, fixtures, partitions and floors.

"Staffing for next year's game will include restroom attendants, additional clean up crews and supervisory staff in all areas.

"Additional private security for parking lots as well as inside the stadium will be in place.

"Tailgating appeared to have doubled in size in 2006, reducing parking availability. Issues with tailgating are being reviewed to make sure that parking spaces closer to the stadium are available for those attending the game and cruising is kept to a minimum."

Jones said he met with city and stadium officials after receiving the complaints and indeed got a sense that "things were going to be corrected."

There also were complaints about traffic for the Sept. 30 University of Memphis -University of Tennessee game.

Bob Winn, UofM associate athletic director for external affairs, said the problems were mostly to be expected because of the large crowd and the presence of the Mid-South Fair.

"When you're trying to funnel that many vehicles into a very limited number of parking lots, it did what we thought it would do," Winn said. "And that was, create gridlock."

He said, however, that some changes could help, for example making some streets around the stadium one-way entering the stadium before the game.

Once they parked, some Tigers and Vols fans also complained about the time it took to enter the stadium, apparently in part because of some gates that were closed.

"I am told the ones that were closed were exit gates that normally don't open until the end of the game," Winn said. "In hindsight, we were told, it probably would have sped things up a little bit for those exit gates to have been opened and to have had extra event staff there to check people in."

He said there have been some other minor issues, including the cleanliness of bleachers high in the stadium.

Buchanan said some stadium issues were addressed after the Southern Heritage Classic and in time for the Tigers-Vols game.

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Slower pace for Stadium improvements

The City Council votes next week on a plan to renovate restrooms at Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium for the 2007 season.

City Park Services director Cindy Buchanan said other stadium upgrades that were expected for the next three or four years "are now going to be spread out over a longer time period" because of the city's financial situation. But, she said, "The commitment is still there for \$15 million in improvements."

Those other upgrades are:

concession stands and sound system.

suites and press box.

new locker and media rooms.

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