

Reno balloon races struggle to stay afloat

By Frank X. Mullen Jr., Reno Gazette-Journal

The Great Reno Balloon Race has been hemorrhaging funding over the past few years, but organizers said the 28-year-old event isn't in danger of a crash landing.

"I think, considering what's been happening, we're doing pretty well," said Marlene Olsen, executive director for the race. "At least we're bleeding less than last year."

The free event began in 1982 with 20 balloons and about 5,000 attendees. By the 1990s, it boasted more than 100 balloons and 100,000 spectators, and its tax returns showed a \$250,000 carryover from one year to the next. In those days, companies were lining up to sponsor balloons, Olsen said.

Then came the economic downturn.

Major sponsors dropped out or reduced support. Costs and services became more expensive. Crowds got larger, but volunteerism dropped. Merchandise sales decreased.

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