

Eclipse 2024

Arkansas is in the path of totality for this spectacular event. Is your community prepared?

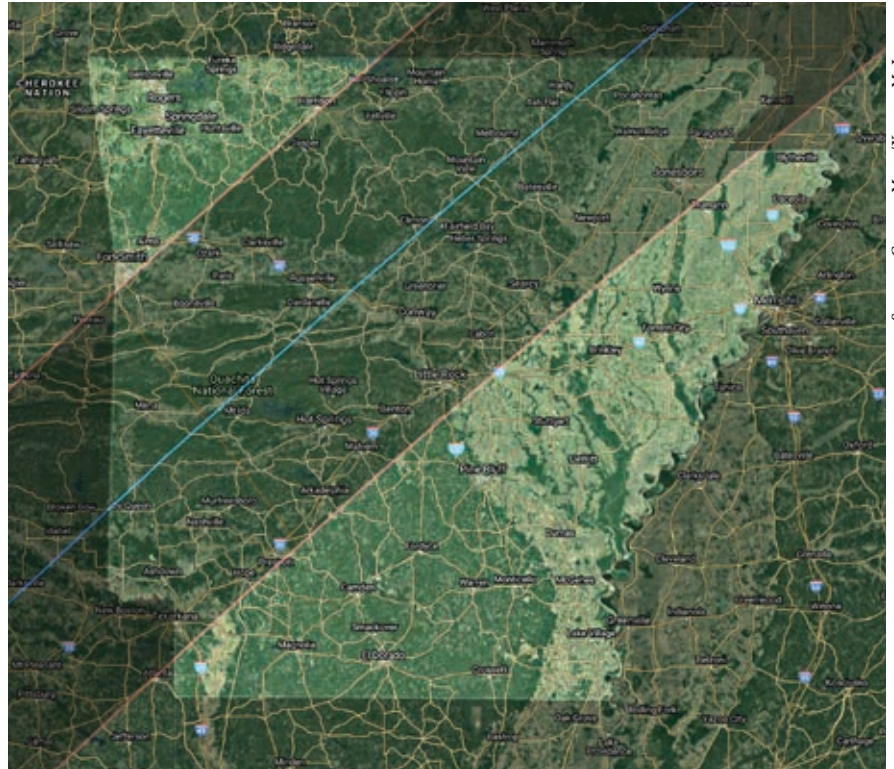
By Emily Cooper Yates

During the week of August 2-6, the University of Central Arkansas (UCA) Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED) hosted the 35th Annual Community Development Institute (CDI). Each year community developers, elected officials and community leaders flock to UCA's campus for a week of immersive training covering a range of topics related to community and economic development. This year's curriculum included a session about the 2024 North American total solar eclipse.

UCA astronomy professor Dr. Scott Austin, Trish Erzfeld, director of Perry County Heritage Tourism in Perryville, Missouri, and Visit Hot Springs marketing director Bill Solleder hosted an engaging and informative panel about the upcoming cosmic event. Each presenter offered a different perspective on the occasion—science, tourism and marketing.

Dr. Austin explained that a total solar eclipse occurs when the sun, moon and Earth align perfectly. The moon passes in front of the sun, which blocks out the sun's light, causing a moment of darkness during the daytime. The occurrence of a total solar eclipse is rare and seeing the event in one's lifetime is even less likely. Geographic location determines the visibility of the spectacle. Locations with the best view are part of what is called the path of totality. The last time Arkansas was in the path of totality was in 1918. A portion of Arkansas is in the path of totality for the next total solar eclipse on April 8, 2024.

This once-in-a-lifetime occurrence sets the stage for a boom in tourism for the state. The last total solar eclipse occurred in North America in 2017. Communities of all sizes in the path of totality experienced a record increase of visitors eager to get the best possible view of the eclipse. During their session at CDI, the presenters offered the following pieces of advice to prepare your community for the next solar eclipse.



SOURCE: GOOGLE MAPS/XAVIER M. JOUBIER

The path of totality for the 2024 eclipse covers a wide swath of Arkansas, offering a unique tourism opportunity for cities and towns.

Address the who, where and what

Immediately following the 2017 eclipse, Visit Hot Springs created a Facebook Event to generate buzz for the 2024 eclipse that quickly garnered 82,900 responses. Solleder noted that Hot Springs expects to see an influx of 100,000 visitors, whereas a smaller city like Pocahontas may see up to 15,000 visitors. Solleder said spectators will come to your community—regardless of size—eager to get the perfect view of the eclipse. As such, you should start planning as soon as possible. Begin by asking “who, where and what”: who is coming, where will they stay and what will the weather be?

Perryville, Missouri, was among the few towns in the coveted path of totality in 2017. The community estimated tens of thousands of tourists would visit the town of less than 10,000. Community leadership quickly began to question how their infrastructure would support such an explosion of people. Erzfeld established the Perry County Eclipse Task Force, which consisted of more than 50 people from all levels of government, astronomical societies, chambers of commerce and other community leaders. She explained that the task force was essential to make planning for a massive gathering more digestible and ensure every detail was considered. “The one thing I would do differently for the next eclipse is to begin planning earlier,” Erzfeld said.

Order your eclipse glasses now

Looking directly at the eclipse can damage your eyesight, so it is necessary to wear special solar filters or eclipse glasses for protection. Not only are these glasses essential for safety, but they also make great souvenirs or keepsakes to commemorate a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

“Over 31,000 pairs of eclipse glasses were sold or distributed by the Perryville tourism office,” Erzfeld said.

Legitimate eclipse glasses comply with transmission requirements of the ISO 12312-2. It is best to purchase your compliant eclipse glasses for 2024 as soon as possible, as vendors sold out quickly in 2017. The American Astronomical Society’s website has a list of reputable vendors for eclipse glasses (eclipse.aas.org).

Make the most out of a moment

The solar eclipse itself will last less than five minutes, but visitors are likely to stay in the area overnight and make a trip out of the occasion. Plan to make the most out of visitors’ time in your community by hosting additional celebrations.

Perry County turned the 2017 eclipse, timed at about four minutes, into a week-long festival called Solarfest. In the days leading up to the main event, tourists and residents alike participated in a glow-in-the-dark 5k and a mud run, visited a mobile planetarium and contributed to a chalk art festival. “The 2017 eclipse gave Perryville worldwide exposure to people that normally would not have known about our city,” Erzfeld said. “It allowed us to showcase what was special about our area to potential visitors, businesses and residents.”

A solar eclipse is a can’t-miss cosmic display. With Arkansas in the path of totality for the 2024 total solar eclipse, communities should anticipate a major increase in tourism. Start planning now to prepare your community for this historic event.

CDI 2022 will be held August 1-5, 2022. If you are interested in learning more about the Community Development Institute, visit www.uca.edu/cdi. 🏠



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