

The Commonwealth Games are, first and foremost, a showcase of athletic competition. No such event takes place in a vacuum, so the ancillary effects of the games mean people not directly participating have major roles to play. The support personnel go beyond event staff – the localities that host the games need a strong infrastructure of dining, lodging, entertainment as well as emergency services, facilities management and maintenance, and various other roles to help the Games succeed.

The economic impact of the Games makes them an attractive event to host. That’s why Liberty University and the City of Lynchburg put together a package to lure the Games to the Hill City five years ago.

VAS asked Marjette Upshur, Lynchburg’s director of the Office of Economic Development & Tourism what the Games have meant to the City in the past five years and going forward.

With the City being a sponsor of the games, what do you see as the benefits received directly or indirectly?

“In 2020, the Commonwealth Games, even drastically pared down due to COVID-19 restrictions, produced more than \$1.5 million in economic impact for events held in the City of Lynchburg. Hosting the Commonwealth Games in the City of Lynchburg has a tremendous impact – engaging our community, bringing athletes, families and spectators and showcasing all of the wonderful restaurants, attractions and recreational assets.”

What do you hear from businesses – especially in hospitality – about the Games and their effect on those businesses in the last five years since moving to the City and LU?

“Our hospitality community loves the Commonwealth Games! Partnerships with Lynchburg hotels are strong and they are delighted to book during these summer weekends, not only during Main Games weekends but also other weekends that events take place. Our staff has worked with the hospitality community for several years – providing notebooks to all hotels with Games information, and working with restaurants and attractions to maximize the impact of the Games.”

The 2020 Games had a participation rate of 53 percent compared to a normal year last year, but since many events were cancelled entirely, does the City and/or the business community have any feedback about the fact they were held at all?

“Last year, the City worked closely with Virginia Amateur Sports, Liberty University and the Virginia Department of Health to ensure a safe experience for all participants and for the citizens of Lynchburg. The fact that the games were able to be held safely was a really bright spot in an incredibly challenging year.”

Since restrictions on attendance are newly lifted in Virginia, the Games will be the first large, multi-day event to attract thousands to the city. Does that offer a benefit in itself as people are eager to return to normalcy?

“Yes.”

In 2019 The Games included the State Games of America. Would the City consider partnering with Liberty and Virginia Amateur Sports on an attempt to land another national event?

“Absolutely! The State Games of America was a tremendously successful event for the City of Lynchburg. We stand ready to showcase the City of Lynchburg to bring back these amazing competitors from across the country.”

What are the extra things do to make a positive impression on out-of-town visitors around events such as the Games or the Virginia 10-miler?

“We work closely with events rights holders to showcase the best of the City of Lynchburg, everything from social media and digital promotion, welcome banners and giveaways to beautification of the City’s gateways and parks.”

With Liberty’s vastly expanded athletic facilities, has the City taken any initiative toward a sports-focused brand or will it defer to the university for that?

“The world class athletic facilities at Liberty University definitely puts Lynchburg on the map when it comes to attracting regional and national sporting events. Leaning into this competitive advantage, we have developed a sports tourism action plan to engage Liberty and all of our colleges and universities to work together to recruit and attract sporting events. Last year, we developed a Sports Facilities Guide to showcase all athletic facilities in the region and contracted with the Huddle Up Group and their Scout tool to match Lynchburg and event organizers to maximize the impact of these facilities. In addition to the Commonwealth Games, the City of Lynchburg hosts legacy sporting events such as the Virginia Ten Miler (running), Storming Thunder Ridge (biking) and the Lynchburg City Open (tennis).”

The Games have benefited from the change of venue, but with any good relationship of this type, a win-win scenario is ideal for the event organizers and the hosts. In this case- a win-win-win situation plays out, with Lynchburg winning along with Liberty when it comes to recognizing the hosts.