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Perfect day for a parade

Plenty of police at peaceful Juneteenth

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Milwaukee police, community leaders and festival organizers who promised a safe and enjoyable Juneteenth Day were proved largely correct Thursday, as thousands gathered to celebrate the day in 1865 when slaves in Texas received word they were free.

No major incidents were reported, and the weather cooperated as the smell of barbecue billowed and the sounds of jazz echoed along a four-block stretch of N. King Ave.

“It’s going really nice,” said Cassandra Jefferson, 24, as she and other members of her church sold corn, hot dogs, chicken and brats from under a tent to raise money for an upcoming trip to Africa. “I came down here last year, and it’s a lot better this year. There’s no violence, no commotion, just people out enjoying themselves and having a good time.” About 200 Milwaukee police officers patrolled the festival this year, 50 more than were assigned to last year’s event.

The increased police presence was meant to prevent disturbances that have marred previous Juneteenth festivals.

Last year, a 43-year-old man suffered a broken eye socket and other injuries after being dragged from his car by a group of people as the crowd dispersed at the end of the festival.

At the end of the 2006 festival, police were called to break up a crowd that tore down a tent and used the poles to beat each other. In 2002, a group of people threw sticks and bottles at officers.

On Thursday, 19 people were cited for disorderly conduct and one for obstructing or resisting an officer, said police spokeswoman Anne E. Schwartz. Most came toward the end of the festival.

No injuries or violent incidents were reported, she said.

“It’s been a really nice crowd,” said District 5 Capt. Anthony Smith. “It’s been peaceful. It’s very well-attended . . . It’s been a great festival.”

As Thursday's festival came to an end about 6 p.m., police officers wearing helmets and face shields, and officers and sheriff's deputies on horseback and motorcycles monitored the crowd. A helicopter provided to the Police Department at no cost by the nonprofit Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition circled the area. .

"The police are doing their jobs," said Warren Smith, 40, as he watched the crowd clear out. "I like the security down here. If anything breaks out, the police are right here. It seems like they're getting more and more organized each year, and that's a good thing. I feel really relaxed this year."

Thursday's festival should help restore the event's reputation, said festival-goer Keith Bailey.

"One-tenth of one percent of the people at this festival gave it a bad image," Bailey said. "This is a great day. Look around at the multitude of families enjoying the day and celebrating."

The day's perfect weather provided friends a chance to catch up and politicians an opportunity to angle for votes.

The presidential campaign of Sen. Barack Obama was much in evidence, with T-shirts reading "I voted for Obama, and so did my Momma," selling well.

Obama's campaign workers set up a booth on the north side of the festival, handing out buttons, stickers and literature as well as registering voters. A group of about 40 supporters marched in the morning parade, eliciting "Yes we can" chants from the crowd.

U.S. Rep. Gwen Moore's (D-Wis.) political director and sister, Brenda Moore, used the festival to gather signatures to get the congresswoman on the ballot for re-election. By 10:30 a.m., she had already acquired 300 signatures.

Martha Love, chair of the Milwaukee County Democratic Party, said about 80,000 people were expected at the festival during its peak hour, 3 p.m., making it a good place to promote candidates.

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