

Preparations continue for Balloons Over Mt. Vernon

*Event organizers ready a
number of activities in
addition to the balloons*

BY EMILY ROTH
SENTINEL NEWS STAFF

MT. VERNON — With Balloons Over Mt. Vernon flying into town next month, event organizers gathered on Monday to discuss more than just balloons, including a ping pong ball drop and an education zone.

Balloons Over Mt. Vernon will be at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport from Oct. 16-18, featuring 18 balloons. Various activities, vendors, crafters, inflatables, and other family-friendly events will be available for the community from Friday through Sunday.

Event Coordinator Jennifer Witzel told those in attendance that both Mt. Vernon Rotary clubs are currently selling tickets for a ping pong ball drop to be held on Oct. 17 at 10 a.m.

"We've got both Rotaries on board ..." she said. "You can have a chance to win a ride for two from the Rotary. And the deal for that is they are selling the tickets, you get your number on a ping pong ball. We'll take all these balls up in our tether balloon and [Kevin Witzel] is going to drop them. We're going to have an 'X' on the ground, and whichever ball lands closest to the center of the 'X' will win the ride. The trouble is that when you dump those, they just go, they take off."

Young Eagle rides will occur from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Oct. 17. Any child, age 8 to 17, may take a 5- to 10-minute exploratory flight in an airplane for free. "It's a great thing, and a way for us to promote aviation, trying to get people involved," said Witzel.

Please see **Balloons**, Page 3A



Sentinel Photo/EMILY ROTH

EVENT POSTER — Jennifer and Kevin Witzel display the new glossy poster advertising Balloons Over Mt. Vernon. The Witzels, as well as other event organizers, met on Monday at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport.

Balloons:

Continued From Page 1A

"People hear about it and don't realize it's free," said Debi Richardson, a volunteer with the United Way of South Central Illinois.

Another children's activity will be the Tri-County Aviation Education Zone, also being held from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Oct. 17.

"Aviation Education Zone, to kind of tie in to the Young Eagle rides, we're gonna have that down in the National Railway hangar as well," Witzel said. "The SIU [Southern Illinois University] School of Aviation will be

bringing simulators plus students. We have a remote-control hot air balloon that'll be in it, and we have a huge balloon envelope that has been gutted and we'll inflate that and kids can walk through it and play in it."

Balloon pilots will also be on hand to answer questions. According to Witzel, the possibility of a NASA display is still in the works.

Rides are currently being sold for the P-51 Mustang "Red Nose." Those interested in signing up for rides are encouraged to call the airport. In addition, sponsors are still being sought for the World War I Curtiss JN-4 "Jenny" biplane and the Lockheed PV-2 Harpoon which are coming. 9-15-15
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