

AROUND ALABAMA MOBILE

Mardi Gras in May? City hopes to roll out parade.

Festivities on May 21 would help celebrate new Navy ship named for the city

John Sharp jsharp@al.com

Mobile is ready to give Mardi Gras another try with a one-night Carnival-style parade through the downtown streets on May 21. But before anyone shouts, “Let the good times roll!” the city administration is signaling that COVID-19 will dictate whether the party goes on.

Mayor Sandy Stimpson told the City Council on Tuesday that conversations are under way with mystic societies about joining a Friday night parade coinciding with the commissioning of the USS Mobile, a littoral combat ship built at Austal USA.

Stimpson said the city’s goal is to create the best commissioning event yet for one of Austal USA’s LCS warships. “We have some work to do,” he said.

Stimpson said, “I don’t think every Mardi Gras organization wants to put all of their floats into a parade. It may be that an organization can put two or three floats in it. At some point, the parade gets so long we don’t have a route long enough to accommodate so many floats.”

A city spokesman later said that the administration will continue monitoring COVID-19 infections in the community, and that plans will be based on the trajectory of COVID-19 cases and vaccinations.

Said Stimpson: “The COVID numbers are excellent right now. With the governor’s recent order that we are no longer wearing masks after the 9th of April, I feel comfortable at this point in time, based on what we know, that we can have a big event and that it can be a safe event. We’ll keep our eyes on the ball regarding COVID to make sure we don’t end up creating something we don’t anticipate.”

Mobile County’s latest two-week average of positive COVID-19 tests is 6.4%; the rate was 32.86% in early January when coronavirus cases were spiking.

Still, Alabama lags behind other states in vaccinations. According to New York Times data, only 8.4% of the Alabama public is fully vaccinated thus far. Another

15% has received one dose of the required two doses of vaccine.

Stimpson said he hoped that, by late May, half the public could be vaccinated, but he doubted the figure would be close to 70%.

County Health Officer Dr. Bernard Eichold said last week that Alabama needed to get to the 70% vaccination level “before letting our guard down.”

This week, Eichold said it was too early to predict what the COVID-19 status will be in late May. He said that the county Health Department recommends “strict compliance” with the Navy’s safety guidance for the USS Mobile commissioning event.

Dr. Karen Landers, the state’s assistant health officer, said that even with declining infection numbers and more people being vaccinated, “all measures to reduce transmission should remain in place.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advised on Monday that vaccinated adults can plan mask-free dinners with vaccinated friends, and that vaccinated grandparents can once again visit adult children and grandchildren under certain conditions. According to health officials, it was the CDC’s first pro-activities advice since the pandemic began a year ago.

But the CDC continues to suggest the public avoid large gatherings, particularly those in which social distancing cannot be maintained. Mobile’s Mardi Gras parades, though held outside, are attended by large crowds that pack in tight along downtown streets.

City Council President Levon Manzie said he believes that as vaccination numbers climb, and hospitalizations drop, there is a “great possibility” for the city to host a Mardi Gras-style parade.

“I am hopeful it plays out as we celebrate this new ship,” said Manzie, adding that he supports the parade “if everything is an all-go from a health and safety standpoint.”

If the parade happens, it will be the first Carnival-like event to roll this year and will occur three months after Fat Tuesday on Feb. 16.

Mobile, like New Orleans and almost every other city along the Gulf Coast, canceled Mardi Gras parades and formal balls during this year’s Carnival season. Mobile did open the way for revelers to roam freely in downtown on Fat Tuesday by shutting



Wayne Dean, aka Chief Slacabamarinico, says he’d be glad to don his Chickasaw garb and bring out his coal wagon for a May 21 Mardi Gras-style parade to herald the commissioning of the new USS Mobile warship. “It’s a great idea, if they can do this,” he says of the parade. *AL.com*.

streets to motor traffic, but the crowd was estimated at only about 1,700.

A parade in May, according to city spokesman Jason Johnson, “isn’t an attempt to host a postponed Mardi Gras.” He said the concept will be a single parade to coincide with the USS Mobile commissioning.

Stimpson, himself, said he wasn’t sure he would be able to join the parade. He said he might be obligated to attend a U.S. Navy dinner the night before the commissioning ceremony.

“I can assure you that to the point I can be in the parade that I will be in the parade,” he said. “I’ll participate in making sure we are having a great event.”

It’s not uncommon for Mobile to host Mardi Gras-style parades outside of the Carnival season. For example, in a typical year, there’s a high-energy parade ahead of the Reese’s Senior Bowl.

Wayne Dean, a Mobile historian who portrays the Chief Slacabamarinico char-

acter at Mardi Gras time, said he’s willing to appear in a May parade with his famous coal wagon. “It’s a great idea, if they can do this,” he said.

He said, however, that some mystic societies could be hesitant about rolling out newly built floats that were parked during his year’s Carnival and are set for use in 2022. He said the floats risk being damaged.

Judi Gullledge, executive director with the Mobile Carnival Museum, said she believes there is enough interest from mystic societies to participate in a “mini-parade” in May. She said a key attraction is the community pride in having a USS Mobile. “It’s not every day you have a ship named after your city,” Gullledge said. “There will be some support for that.”

She added, “The community is really ready for a celebration. I believe we’ll be in a much safer situation as we make progress with vaccinations. I think the community will feel safer with getting out.”

FOOD

It’s time to eat, Birmingham

Continues from A17

**BACON, LETTUCE AND TOMATO SANDWICH**
Hamburger Heaven

Sure, Hamburger Heaven is best known for its burgers and shakes, but on a recent visit, a regular customer turned us on to the BLT, and it made us wonder why it’s taken us this long to discover it. With crispy bacon, shredded lettuce and sliced tomatoes on grilled bread, the Hamburger Heaven BLT is divine.

Hamburger Heaven, four locations in Birmingham area, thehamburgerheaven.com

**PORK CHOP SANDWICH**
Saw’s Southside

You can never go wrong with Saw’s pork ‘n’ greens or the sweet-tea fried chicken sandwich, but if you haven’t already, be sure to add the fried pork chop sandwich with lettuce, tomato, onion, pickles and special sauce to your Saw’s repertoire.

Saw’s Southside, 1154 11th Ave. S., Birmingham, sawsbq.com

**LEMON MERINGUE PIE**
FoodBar

Be sure to save room for dessert when you visit chef George McMillan III’s lively neighborhood restaurant in the heart of Cahaba Heights. And let us recommend pastry chef Wim Miree’s tart and sweet lemon meringue mini pie with a citrus shortbread crust and toasted meringue and accented with housemade lemon drops.

FoodBar, 3156 Heights Village, Vestavia Hills, foodbar-bham.com

**ANGEL BISCUITS**
Helen

While grilled meats and seafood are the main attraction at Rob and Emily McDaniel’s new downtown restaurant, these pillowy little angel biscuits with whipped cane syrup butter are the perfect start to any meal at Helen, which was inspired by and is named for Rob’s maternal grandmother, Helen Frutiger.

Helen, 2013 Second Ave. S., Birmingham, helenbham.com

**MARGHERITA PIZZA**
Le Fresca

Chef Marco Butturini — who worked with Frank Stitt in the kitchens at Highlands Bar and Grill, Chez Fonfon and Bottega — brings some of his favorite dishes from his native Northern Italy to downtown Birmingham at Le Fresca, which opened in early 2020. Among the entrees are chicken cacciatore and sweet potato ravioli, but the traditional Italian pizzas are the stars of the show here. Made from flour imported from Italy and fired in a wood-burning oven also shipped from Italy, the light and crispy pizzas are served uncut, just like in Butturini’s home country. So you can choose to cut it into eight, six, four or two slices, whatever you prefer. The basic Margherita pizza — with mozzarella and basil — is simplicity at its finest.

Le Fresca, 2218 Second Ave. N., Birmingham, lefrescabhm.com

**BOILED PEANUTS**
Alabama Peanut Co.

The Alabama Peanut Company is continuing a Birmingham tradition that began in 1907. And since founder Jamie Thursby moved into the old Peanut Depot space three years ago, he’s added a variety of boiled peanuts to the menu, including flavors featuring such Alabama products as Dale’s Steak Seasoning, Buffalo Rock Ginger Ale, Milo’s Famous Sweet Tea, Wickles Pickles and Dreamland Bar-B-Que sauce.

Alabama Peanut Co., 2016 Morris Ave., Birmingham, alabamapeanut.com