

 **Local News:**

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**County closes Competition Hill****By LAURA MITCHELL**

Staff Writer

Competition Hill, a spot for some of the wildest parties at the Imperial Sand Dunes, will be closed at night this Thanksgiving holiday to help gain control of lawlessness in the dunes.

The nighttime closure, effective immediately, was declared in a resolution as an emergency item by the county Board of Supervisors on Tuesday after law enforcement officials realized the number of people visiting the dunes is increasing.

"We think there will be huge crowds. The two weekends surrounding Halloween this year were bigger than expected, so we think Thanksgiving will be bigger, too," county Sheriff Harold Carter said.

Last year the four-day Thanksgiving holiday at the dunes was the most violent weekend ever there as fewer than 40 law enforcement officers tried to control more than 200,000 visitors.

The weekend saw a shootout in which a man lost his life, stabbing incidents and someone in a BMW — trying to evade a speeding ticket — running over a bureau ranger.

U.S. Bureau of Land Management Supervising Ranger Bob Haggerty said the problems are a lot like what used to happen in Palm Springs during spring break and what happens in New Orleans during Mardi Gras.

Last Thanksgiving we counted up to 10,000 people partying at Comp Hill, Haggerty said.

Most of the people at the dunes are law-abiding and are there to ride. The problem is the smaller percentage of visitors who come to the dunes to party, he said.

Carter agreed, saying the rave parties in the bowl at the bottom of North Competition Hill don't have anything to do with off-roading.

"It's not safe for off-roaders, law enforcement officers or paramedics," he said.

said.

Carter said once Comp Hill is closed at night, the rave crowd will probably move to other locations in the dunes known for parties. These areas might have to be looked at for closure as well.

Haggerty said the BLM is working to close five problem areas at night in the dunes by the New Year's holiday: North Competition Hill, South Competition Hill, Oldsmobile Hill, Test Hill and Patton Valley.

Carter said he would like to get to the point where the areas can be open all the time but he must think of safety first.

American Sand Association President Jerry Seaver said he heard rumors about a possible nighttime closure but was surprised by the decision. Seaver said he was told by law enforcement there would be some discussion before anything happened.

"We've never been for any closures but we understand what's motivating this," he said.

Off-road groups have been fighting against environmental closures imposed in recent years.

Local off-roading advocate Chuck Mobley of Brawley said he considers the action just another closure, but added, "If it will stop the rowdiness and lawlessness, I would be all for it — if it works."

Center for Biological Diversity Desert ecologist Daniel Patterson said the board's action shows the situation at the dunes had gotten out of control.

But, Patterson added, he was not sure what authority the supervisors had to close federal land.

"It's dangerous to hand over federal land decisions to a local authority," he said.

Conservationists are concerned the BLM does not become "puppets of the county board," Patterson said.

He said he is concerned the parties will move to another, more environmentally sensitive area of the dunes.

County Supervisor Wally Leimgruber, whose district includes the sand dunes, said Comp Hill will be closed for a half-hour before sunset until a half-hour after sunrise.

Haggerty didn't say how officers will keep people out of the bowl, only that it is still being planned.

The board is also considering asking for county Fire Chief Joe Buzo's support to declare a state of emergency. The county declared a state of emergency in December 2001 because of increasing chaos at the Imperial Sand Dunes following the Thanksgiving holiday weekend.

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