

Thanks for a job well done

By Roberta Forsell Stauffer, Montana Standard opinion page editor - 3/21/07

What a great idea. Butte-Silver Bow police decided to take a friendlier approach to St. Patrick's Day crowd control this year, and it worked wonders, for the most part.

An estimated 15,000 people turned out for the celebration, many of whom undoubtedly drank more beer than they should have, but there was only one felony arrest for the whole weekend.

A man threw a beer can at a police officer, but fortunately the officer wasn't seriously injured.

The ingenious idea was to avoid creating an us-them-type relationship with the crowd. Rather than regularly drive patrol cars through the swarms of visitors in the streets, police switched to foot patrols this year and mingled with the revelers. They volunteered to take photos; they chatted up the crowds, building good will and positive energy during the sunny daylight hours that no doubt came in handy when darkness fell and they faced the difficult task of dispersing drunken groups who didn't necessarily want the party to end.

The idea for this new approach came from the officers themselves, who suggested that mingling would help to ease tensions.

"We were doing things differently to see how it would work and obviously it did," Sheriff John Walsh told The Standard on Monday. "It definitely took the edge off of some of it. You talk to people rather than talk at them and it really does help." Great job, police officers, for coming up with a new approach and pulling it off with finesse. Thanks, too, to the highway patrolmen who assisted. Walsh said the local officers couldn't have handled that large a crowd without your reinforcements. We were doing things differently to see how it would work and obviously it did," Sheriff John Walsh told The Standard on Monday. "It definitely took the edge off of some of it. You talk to people rather than talk at them and it really does help." Great job, police officers, for coming up with a new approach and pulling it off with finesse. Thanks, too, to the highway patrolmen who assisted. Walsh said the local officers couldn't have handled that large a crowd without your reinforcements.

Walsh praised his entire department — including administrative people, detention center staff, and dispatchers — for doing a commendable job working an extraordinarily busy (and probably dreaded) weekend. Even though there were no real serious incidents, still about 90 people were arrested for minor misdemeanors.

And thanks as well to the Butte Pre-Release Center's clean-up crews, along with the public works department and Mainstreet Butte. Streets lined with beer cans and garbage were again looking decent by Sunday, and hopefully all that aluminum made it to a recycling center. Uptown bars only served cans and plastic cups, which was a smart idea. In future years, glass should be banned from the Uptown altogether if possible to cut down on the mess.

There won't be another celebration like St. Patrick's Day 2007 until at least 2013 when the holiday will again fall on a Saturday. And if the weather forecast is sunny and warm, organizers should order up twice as many Porta-Potties and at least that many more garbage cans. And remember, you can ask a police officer to snap a quick photo to capture the moment. He or she will gladly oblige.