

# 2017 eclipse a major event

## County already bracing for influx of visitors

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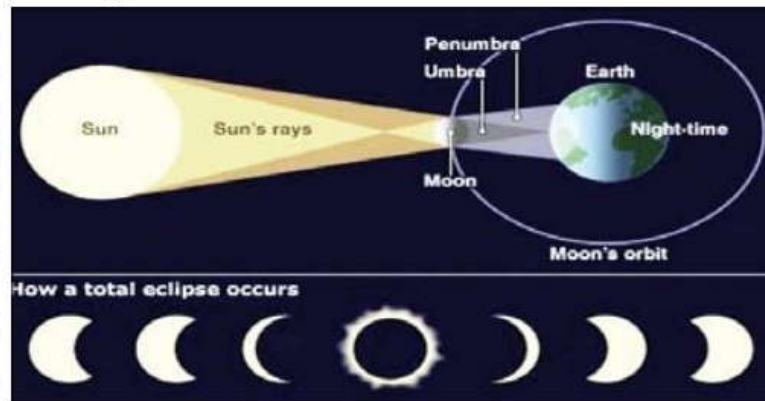
About two and half minutes of complete darkness. That's what a total solar eclipse will bring to Clay

County next August. Because the totality of the eclipse will sweep across the country in a narrow path, thousands of people are expected to converge on the places where it can be viewed.

"We happen to be right in the right spot in our part of the world," Young Harris College Astronomy Professor Steve Morgan said at a Rotary luncheon on Tuesday. "This truly is a big sky event."

The total eclipse will occur between 2:35 p.m. and 2:37 p.m. on Monday, Aug. 21 and while it's a year off, Clay County is preparing for the influx of people. An Eclipse Task Force spearheaded by Clay County's Travel and Tourism Board and board chairperson Lee Holland has been established.

Many places expecting a total eclipse appoint and sometimes hire



a designated eclipse coordinator or team.

Clay County Board of Commission Chairman Randy Nichols sent a letter expressing the commissioners' support of Holland and the Travel and Tourism Board for their efforts to coordinate strategies. Travel and Tourism is a voluntary board; therefore, no county tax dollars are currently being utilized for the strategic planning.

On Oct. 19, the aptly named Eclipse Task Force had its first official planning meeting at the Clay County Chamber of Commerce. Copies of a document by Eclipse consultant Dr. Kate Russo were distributed at the meeting. "Regions within the path of totality benefit substantially, both in the short and long-term, from the sheer scale of visitors and huge media interest," page 5 of the document reads. "Eclipse planning requires a dedicated person whose time requirements increase as the eclipse draws near.

Additional support staff may also be necessary, especially in the final months.

These include people for marketing support, managing and updating Web sites, media communications and the development and production of additional materials."

Holland explained how the group will need a lot of help from the community since Clay County does not have a dedicated Eclipse coordinator.

She attended a meeting of the Jackson County Eclipse Committee and learned some of what it is planning. "We are way behind many other counties in our planning," she said. "We want to get people into our town, through our town and safely around our town."

Eclipse Task Force member Bob Hanson, a hobbyist astronomer, repeated what he had read, "It is already the most requested vacation holiday in America's history. We're likely to see many more visitors

throughout the summer as many will come prior to find where they want to watch. During the event, you take your normal population and triple it."

Past total eclipse events have brought crowds of people to the viewing areas; however, with the crowds and the unusual nature of the event, other issues must be dealt with.

Congested traffic, camping and other lodging and public viewing areas are just some of the issues. Community education about safely viewing the eclipse is a key component, especially for children.

The Clay County School Board must decide whether to begin school that day or a later date. "We will probably not set the calendar for 2017-2018 until February or March. If we have 30,000 or more extra people projected to be on our roads, there is a pretty good chance our buses will not add to that number," said School Superintendent Mark Leek.

Because of safety concerns, Emergency Management Director Ricky Lancaster and Sheriff Vic Davis are part of the group. Lancaster said an early November meeting is scheduled in Swain County to plan coordination with EMS, the North Carolina Highway Patrol and the Department of Transportation. "The state wants to control logistics of sending extra highway patrol and DOT for safety," he said.

Morgan added, "For our neck of the woods, it is a once in a millennium event. The last total solar eclipse anywhere in the United States was in 1979 in a small part of the country.

Last time a total solar eclipse went coast to coast across the United States was 1918. The last time Hayesville was in the path of totality for a total solar eclipse was the year 1506. This will truly be once in a lifetime for most people."

Not only does a total solar eclipse attract people from all over the world, but many may decide to

visit again. The long-term impact can be huge.

For now, Dr Russo's conclusion reflects the impact the event may have on our area: "A total solar eclipse often imparts a long-term legacy to a region, including a significant economic benefit, new strategic partnerships, international exposure, new tourism connections and a feel-good factor that lasts a lifetime.

The event often inspires children and adults alike to develop an interest in nature and astronomy.

Planning for a total solar eclipse in your region is challenging, but also exciting and rewarding. Indeed, the awe-inspiring phenomenon that is a total solar eclipse provides a unique opportunity to promote your region to the whole world."

Dr. Russo's Web site is: [www.Beingintheshadow.com](http://www.Beingintheshadow.com). Some other sites to visit include: [www.eclipse-watch.com](http://www.eclipse-watch.com), [www.Eclipsewise.com](http://www.Eclipsewise.com) and [www.Eclipse2017.org](http://www.Eclipse2017.org).