

MARYLAND

H2Oi 2021: How Ocean City plans to tackle pop-up car rally



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In under four weeks, Ocean City will likely be filled with drag racing, excessive drinking, cars doing donuts and other unruly behaviors as thousands head to town for unofficial H2Oi.

The Motor Event Task Force met Friday to share Ocean City's plans to mitigate crime and harm at this year's unsanctioned car rally.

H2Oi was once an organized car show in the region. Though the official event has since moved to New Jersey, many car enthusiasts continue to celebrate on the Eastern Shore.

Last year's H2Oi resulted in more than 500 cases of charges filed in Worcester County, not including minor traffic citations. Ocean City accounted for 396 of those cases.

Ocean City Police Chief Ross Buzzuro said the town has based its plan to handle this year's H2Oi on what it learned from previous years.

Here's what you can expect at H2Oi 2021:

Reduced speed limits in Worcester County

The town of Ocean City will become a special event zone from Tuesday, Sept. 21, to Sunday, Sept. 26.

During this time, all speed limits over 30 mph will be reduced to 30 mph.

Additionally, plans are in process to make all of Worcester County a special event zone during H2Oi. This would reduce speed limits countywide.

Timeline: How H2Oi spiraled from car show to unruly, 'ugly' rally in Ocean City

H2Oi 2021: Driving to Ocean City from Sept. 21-26? What you can expect

Increased police presence

Ocean City Police is preparing to have "all hands on deck" during the event, according to Buzzuro.

Police presence will increase on the Sunday of H2Oi compared to past years. The department typically has less officers on duty on Sundays, but it has made adjustments so more officers are committed to work on Sunday.

Maryland State Police and the Worcester County Sheriff's Office have partnered with the Ocean City Police Department to provide assistance and resources throughout the event.

Increased police enforcement will also be present along Route 50 from the Bay Bridge to Ocean City.

More: Fines, arrests, tons of police, yet Ocean City has yet to shake H2Oi. What else can be done

BACKGROUND: H2Oi police deployment to Ocean City among largest in state history: MSP

Traffic

Buzzuro advised that those traveling in Ocean City during H2Oi prepare for heavy traffic, specifically from Thursday to Saturday.

"If you don't need to be on Coastal Highway, I don't think it would be the best idea (to drive on it) unless you absolutely have to," he said.

Rumble strips will be placed "strategically" throughout Ocean City, according to Buzzuro.

IN 2020: Crowds take over parts of downtown Ocean City as unofficial car rally escalates

Additionally, vehicles on the road that are deemed to be unsafe will be towed. More than 40 tow trucks will assist OCPD in towing.

In April, the Maryland Department of Transportation announced plans to step up enforcement between the Chesapeake Bay Bridge and Ocean City during H2Oi through the through the Bay to Beach Highway Safety initiative. Local police will watch for speeding,

aggressive driving and any vehicles that don't meet state safety standards during the safety week, said Greg Slater, Maryland secretary of transportation.

Data collecting

Ocean City has signed an agreement with data collection companies. After this year, the town will collect information on who comes to H2Oi and where they go throughout the town and county.

Jessica Waters, Ocean City communications manager, said Ocean City will use data collecting to learn how to further mitigate crime during the unsanctioned event.

"Problem properties"

Ocean City has taken into account several of the properties that bring the biggest issues at H2Oi in previous years.

Mayor Rick Meehan said he has already reached out to one of these properties about past problems, and the property now plans to hire private security and take into account how many people are on property this year.

Meehan and Buzzuro plan to contact several other properties about past issues, to discuss how these issues can be prevented this year.

2021: Ocean City looks to businesses to hire private security during H2Oi

Looking ahead

With H2Oi 2021 just around the corner, Ocean City already has plans in store for H2Oi 2022.

In 2022, Ocean City hopes to hold a three-day concert during the weekend of H2Oi. Additionally, the town wants to host a sporting event that weekend.

"For the last 10 years when the pop-up rally was here, we've kind of been on the defense," Meehan said. "I think we all feel it's time to go on the offense and set our own destiny."

Maddie Aiken is the community reporter for Delmarva Now. Send her story tips at maiken@delmarvanow.com and follow her on Twitter @madsaiken.