

A tale of 2 Pride fests: Why LGBTQ Utahns and allies will celebrate twice this summer

Utah Pride Festival aims to bounce back after going in debt in 2023, while a new grassroots event launches at The Gateway.

By PALAK JAYSWAL
The Salt Lake Tribune

When Roberto Lopez first came to Utah, he said he felt "isolated and excluded" from spaces because he was a queer person of color.

Then, he said, he found the Utah Pride Festival, where he met so many friends that it changed his life.

"They were the people that when I became a father, I turned to. People that when I got sick, I turned to. People when I needed food, [I turned to]," he said. "Every single time I sent out a signal for help, the same people showed up, and those were the people that I met at this event."

Lopez is development director of SLC Pride, a new event that he said is aimed at creating that same opportunity for people in Utah's LGBTQ+ community — especially for people who feel isolated and alone, like he once did.

"I want it to continue forever, because I would not be alive if it wasn't for the people that I found," Lopez said.

SLC Pride is scheduled for the last weekend in June at The Gateway in downtown Salt Lake City — four weeks after, and a few blocks away from the traditional Utah Pride Festival, set for the first weekend in June at Washington Square Park.

Bonnie O'Brien, the director SLC Pride, said many of the event's organizers said they had friends who had stopped attending Utah Pride, "either because it was too corporate, too 'whitewash the rainbow,' too crowded or busy. A lot of the people that we hang out with just didn't see themselves on the stage, in booths or in leadership. Or they were just straight up financially unable to attend."

Utah Pride will be a cut-down version of last year's festival, which ran the nonprofit Utah Pride Center into thousands of dollars of debt and prompted criticism within the state's LGBTQ+ community.

Chad Call, Utah Pride Center's new executive director, said the group still anticipates the same number of people attending as before — 50,000 at the Utah Pride Festival and



PHOTOS BY BETHANY BAKER *The Salt Lake Tribune*
Above and below » Organizers gather for a planning meeting for SLC Pride on May 7.

more than 100,000 at the Utah Pride Parade.

The two festivals "are not in competition," O'Brien said, adding that she sees opportunities for collaboration. SLC Pride has worked with Call, O'Brien said, and has arranged to borrow some equipment from the Utah Pride Center for the latter event.

"We each have a niche, we each fill that role, and it also allows the community to prosper in all levels," O'Brien said.

Utah Pride, building back

For many in Utah, O'Brien said, the Utah Pride Center has been an entry point into the wider LGBTQ+ community.

The Utah Pride Festival's legacy goes back nearly 50 years, back when bar owner Joe

Redburn threw a legger in 1975. It is considered Utah's first pride festival. The event, and the Utah Pride Center, grew from there.

In recent years, though, frustration at the Utah Pride Center among the LGBTQ+ community has also grown, after years of turnover and, as center officials themselves acknowledged in 2023, "massive financial turmoil."

C Meyer, a Utah therapist who specializes in helping non-binary and transgender kids, said she has "attended Pride festivals in the past, [and] it hasn't felt like it's been about community. It's been inaccessible, it's been expensive."

Meyer is the youth coordinator for the new SLC Pride event, which she said she got involved in because of the leadership's influence and the knowledge that they "care about the community" — something, she

said, "Salt Lake City is specifically lacking."

Call said the Utah Pride Center's board of directors are focused on getting "the center back on track with the financial struggles that they have." The board was installed last fall after two rounds of staff layoffs, and after Call's predecessor, Ryan Newcomb, took the executive director job with the goal of cleaning up the financial mess and restoring the LGBTQ+ community's trust in the center (Newcomb — who resigned due to health issues less than seven months into the job — and Call both have referenced an ongoing financial audit of the organization).

"One of the main things that we do is we maintain a focus that Pride is a program before it's a fundraiser," Call said. "It is obviously a fundraiser for the organization, and we can bring a lot of revenue in that way. However, some years — and last year is a perfect example of that — if it's not managed correctly, that doesn't happen."

Call said the center had "anticipated" local vendors might be hesitant to take part in Utah Pride this year, after many expressed frustrations with booth pricing last year.

"It wasn't something that we were blind to," Call said, adding that Utah Pride is offering "more accessible vendor pricing this year" and have "returned to our vendor pricing back to 2022 [levels]."

Call said there are more than 150 pricing options — based on such variables as tent size, type of organization or when the vendor registered — but that a general scale is that local vendors will pay \$400 for a standard booth, and large businesses will pay \$1,600.

Though he wasn't able to provide final numbers in early May, Call said, "I've been really pleasantly surprised we are tracking really good participation... right in line with where we were in 2022."

SLC Pride, starting at the grassroots

At a planning meeting in early May for SLC Pride, 14 members of the festival's 25-person committee gathered in an office space on South Temple. Some wore customized festival shirts that read "volunQueer."

Among the group, Lopez told them, there's more than 100 years of experience in planning pride events and involvement in the LGBTQ+ community.

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