

Vets' Advocate to Lead Parade

John Lee is grand marshal for November 6 event

By Audra Hoefler

A seasoned veteran and advocate for Washington's 670,000 veterans, John Lee was an easy grand marshal choice for the 11th annual Regional Veterans' Day Parade in West Richland.

"He's been wonderful coming to the east side of the state for our events," says May Hays, Chamber of Commerce director. "John has been part of Time of Remembrance for the past four years and served as speaker for the Enterprise Middle School veterans' ceremony."

John is a Vietnam veteran, retired command sergeant major of the U.S. Army and current director of the Washington State Department of Veterans' Affairs, appointed by Gov. Christine Gregoire in 2005. He was formerly the agency's deputy director.

John also is a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, Vietnam Veterans of America, Military Order of the Purple Heart, Disabled Veterans of America and the Association of the U.S. Army.

"He is so involved with our region," says May. "It's neat to see someone from Olympia come over here instead of staying at just west-side events."

The West Richland event, which kicks off at 9:30 a.m. Saturday, November 6, has become a popular venue to honor the region's veterans.

Visitors from near and far either enter the parade or line the streets to show respect and appreciation to those who have served or are serving in the United States military.

By late September, 50 organizations had submitted entries for the parade, though dozens more are expected. Entrants include floats, equestrian groups, bands, marching groups, drill teams, youth spirit (Boy Scouts, Girls

Scouts and more), cars and motorcycles. Political campaigning isn't allowed.

The Combat Vets International will host its main fundraiser at Flat Top Park after the parade, offering coffee, hot cocoa and a chili feed. Donations enable the Combat Vets to buy flags to replace worn flags at veterans' monuments throughout the Tri-Cities.

Music and parade awards also will be given at the park.

The parade's designation as a "regional site" by the Veterans Day National Committee under the Department of Veterans Affairs helps guarantee outstanding participation and attendance.

"Each year, we've received regional site recognition," says May. "It has helped us get connected with all the branches of the military."

The local event is just one of four in Washington state to be recognized by the national committee.

"I am confident that your celebration of Veterans Day will set an example for the rest of the nation to follow," wrote L. Tammy Duckworth, the committee's assistant secretary for public and inter-governmental affairs, in a congratulatory letter to the West Richland Chamber.

The Chamber has worked diligently to build relationships with veterans groups throughout the area. It has formed partnerships with Work Source's veterans' employment representative and the Vet-Corps in Tri-Cities, among others.

"The more we're involved with veterans' groups, the more the Chamber has kind of turned into a marketing arm for them," says May. "And they've helped us get the word out about our events. It's been a win-win for everyone involved." ■

Community members are encouraged to honor veterans by attending or participating in this annual event. Contact the Chamber at (509) 967-0521 for more information.



John Lee is director of the Washington state Department of Veterans Affairs.



The 2009 Veterans Day Parade offered spectators a little bit of everything, including the veterans Color Guard, top. The Benton REA float, left and below, featured former parade grand marshals and honored those from the region who have served our country in the armed forces.

