

Downtown welcomes season with new holiday décor

By Tara Marion

As the result of a community assessment, the City of Kalamazoo, Downtown Kalamazoo Incorporated and the Arcadia Commons Partners have joined together to develop and implement a three-year improvement program for downtown Kalamazoo's holiday decorations.

According to this assessment, which involved 51 organizations, downtown Kalamazoo needed new decorations to support other downtown improvement programs.

Event coordinator Deb Droppers, owner of The Event Company, 4015 E. Hillandale, said the holiday season will "make or break" the profitability of downtown retailers.

"Because of that, we felt that whatever we could do to increase visibility, safety and beauty in a very critical retail period would be best for downtown," explained Droppers.

In addition to that, many of downtown Kalamazoo's decorations are simply old—at least 25-years-old. In fact, the candy canes that form Candy Cane Lane were installed in 1952. These original, stovepipe candy canes will be replaced this year with 10-foot fiberglass candy canes, which, Droppers said, are a lot cleaner, brighter and heavier.

Although the results of the community assessment indicated that decorations should be classic, simple and bright, Candy Cane Lane is one exception to the rule.

"If you're not from this area, it's hard to understand how anybody can be so enamored with those candy canes, but people are," Droppers said. "They're tradition!"

In sync with the classic, simple and bright decorations theme, an animated display will transform Bronson Park's lanelli fountain into a fountain of lights. The 20- to 25-foot animated display incorporates 36 different lighted combinations with four colors: amber, teal, white and clear. The lights are in the fountain pool, as well as on the structure itself.

"It's custom-designed and unique to Kalamazoo," Droppers said. "I think I will be absolutely gorgeous."

Separate from the efforts of the City of Kalamazoo, DKI and the Arcadia Commons Partners, John VanderPloeg, Ed Muller and the greater community launched a fundraising campaign to purchase a new nativity scene for Bronson Park.

In addition to the nativity scene, Bronson Park will sparkle like a winter wonderland with lighted reindeer, snowflakes and multi-colored, lighted pathway trees.

The trees along East Michigan Avenue (from Burdick to Edwards), however, should have clear (white) lights, according to the results of the community assessment. "One of the things people wanted to see was white lights on all the major streets downtown—kind of like Chicago," Droppers explained.

Unfortunately, only the trees along East Michigan Avenue have electrical receptors. As the City of Kalamazoo makes streetscape improvements downtown, it will install electrical receptors in the street grates of the street that will replace the Kalamazoo Mall, as well as on West Michigan Avenue, Rose Street, Water Street, Kalamazoo Avenue and Arcadia Creek.

Similar improvements are being made to Marin Luther King Park, which is an effort to expand the downtown improvements to the north side. It is a park that has lots of potential but no electricity, Droppers said.

Improvements to the park include the installation of electrical receptors in the tree grates and clear lights in all the trees.

In another phased-in program, the Arcadia Commons Partners have proposed a rooftop lighting program, which will incorporate clear lights along the roof lines of the buildings to the north of West Michigan Avenue.

Although it is being initiated this year, this program will be completed as building owners can squeeze it into their budgets, which should be in 1999.

Another project that relies on the success of fundraising efforts is a gingerbread village.

Because the majority of downtown's foot traffic (tour buses, employees and children) is during the day, the community assessment indicated that people wanted decorations that they could see and touch during the day. Finding something tangible that would create magical feeling was a difficult but important task.

Because a specific location for the gingerbread village is uncertain, plans are on hold, but definite plans indicate that the gingerbread village be a reflection of the community.

"For example, we could do a smaller design of Henderson Castle or some of the more significant homes in our community," Droppers explained. A year-long program to raise money for the gingerbread village is currently underway, as well as other fundraising efforts.

Individuals who are interested in contributing may send a check to the City of Kalamazoo Holiday Decorations Program, Department of Public Services, 911 Hatfield, Kalamazoo, Mich. 49008 through December.

Businesses, organizations and individuals are encouraged to help Candy Cane Lane by purchasing a sponsorship for \$450, which will buy a new candy cane and a nameplate in Bronson Park.

"That plate stays on for the life of the candy cane, which is pretty good exposure if you look at the track record," Droppers said. Those interested may contact the Public Works Division at 337-8002.

All decorations will be lit at the Tree Lighting Ceremony on Nov.28 at 7 p.m. in Bronson Park.

Droppers concluded, "I hope people will see what we've done this year and will join our efforts to raise money, so we can go on to the next phase."