

Economy forcing cutbacks on city holiday decorations

BY CAROLYN STEEVES

As we enter the holiday season, the economy is forcing some cities to deck the halls a little less this year and cut back spending on their public holiday decorations.

For cities in the metro Charlotte area, it seems to be business as usual, with only a few cutbacks here and there.

Jim Banbury, communications manager for the Charlotte Engineering & Property Management department, said that inside the city buildings will have decorations again though there "will be a small cutback." However, there will be poinsettias and other festive accents.

Outdoor decorations in uptown are done in conjunction with Charlotte Center City Partners. They decorate trees in various parks and 150 poles along Tryon Street. The city supplies the labor, while Center City Partners provides the decorations.

Robert Krumbine, senior vice president of programs and events for Charlotte Center City Partners, said in an e-mail that "Overall, we have kept our décor budget flat through the year, working to keep the center of our city looking the best we can for the holiday season."

Krumbine explained that they keep their budget steady through corporate sponsorships and other partnerships. For instance, Bank of America provides the tree at the Square and Wachovia decorates the Plaza.

Downtown Concord takes a frugal approach to decorating. "We just use the decorations we have and all we do is replace bulbs or sockets on those," Deborah Clark, public relations manager for the city of Concord, explained. She said they use staff to hang the decorations themselves, "So we didn't have any additional costs other than the replacement of the bulbs."

However, Mayor Scott Padgett noted that "last year we did buy a new Christmas tree for downtown and I'm glad that we did it then because obviously with the state of the economy, we wouldn't be buying it this year."

Monroe spent around \$13,000 on decorations this year, which Brian Borne — director for Downtown Monroe — said is comparable to previous years.

Borne explained that Monroe doesn't buy a slew of decorations in one year, "we just kind of buy what is afforded and just keep adding on through the years."

Monroe decorates with banners, lights and a large tree. Next weekend they will hold a tree lighting ceremony and Borne said that the Mayor has promised snow this year.

Some cities spend tens of thousands of dollars on holiday decorations every year. Why is it important for a city to spend so much money on decorating?

"The reason why any city would decorate for the holidays or recognize any holiday is that it's a quality of life issue, where you make your downtown look festive," Clark said. "It also brings

attention to your downtown area or the area where you have your shops."

Borne said that decorating is "just something that a city or town does for its community, for its people." He added that "sometimes, especially in times like we're in now, it's really appreciated by the public to see (decorations) because they may be scaling back in their own way, but it's nice that they can go out and enjoy in the public setting."

Padgett said that he hoped Concord's Christmas festivities last weekend "helped morale and helped to put people in a little better spirit, because I know their minds are on very serious issues with the economy."

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