

LOCAL MAIN STREETS GLOW

DOWNTOWN CORES ARE MERRY AND BRIGHT THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

If Santa and his reindeer find themselves requiring directional lighting while high in the sky above the coast Christmas Eve: no problem. From Washington's Long Beach Peninsula, across the bridge into Oregon's Astoria and heading down U.S. Highway 101 through coastal beach towns, there are lights in all colors: red, blue, green, white, you name it. We've got snowflake lights, star lights, fish lights and ropes of cascading lights and garlands; some blink and some are steady. And that's just for starters. Local towns are all dressed up for the holidays, twinkling, festive, merry and bright.

Right before Thanksgiving, hints of holiday tidings began to appear. It's ho, ho, ho as retail outlets started setting up shop for the season. Downtown associations, visitor's bureaus and city halls also added to the excitement of the season, decking town squares, lampposts, poles, and tall Christmas trees. And volunteers prepared city centers for annual tree lightings, parades and holiday pageants.

Along Washington's peninsula, downtown cores have started to glow with holiday lights. Tree lightings take place, and carolers dig out their mittens and tune up. In Ilwaco on Dec. 5, a hardy crowd of revelers showed up in raincoats for the annual Crabpot Christmas Tree lighting — a short ceremony this year during stormy weather.

In Astoria, the Christmas Club has taken to the streets. Nineteen years ago, Tim and Melba O'Bryant decided to decorate the downtown district for the holiday season. That initial two-person volunteer effort has grown to more than 40 volunteers.

"The volunteers are individuals from the community, the Astoria Fire Department, Pacific Power and Light, the Moose Lodge, Arbor Care Tree Specialists, members of ADHDA and individual business owners," said Alana Garner, executive director of the Astoria Downtown Historic District Association. Tim O'Bryant, aka Mr. Christmas, and Mrs. O. are still at the club's helm.

If you happened into Astoria anytime after 8 a.m. the Saturday before Thanksgiving, you might have thought your eyes were playing tricks on you. Up and down Commercial Street were firemen on ladders, local police, utility

bucket trucks with blinking red lights, and pickup trucks doing the same. There were everyday citizens in safety vests directing traffic; one guy had Christmas music merrily playing from a small speaker on his vest. All of it was to put up Astoria's downtown holiday decorations. The Rusty Cup provided free coffee to workers, and Fultano's was ready with pizza when the job was complete.

The Saturday after Thanksgiving, at 12th and Commercial streets, the holiday season officially got underway with the lighting of all those decorations in Astoria's downtown core. Santa was also ready to get going with wish lists, and carolers invited one and all to sing-along.

In Seaside, the tradition of putting up downtown holiday decorations is just as old as in Astoria.

"We've been putting up holiday lighting displays in some form or other for maybe 20 years," said Keith Chandler, owner of the Seaside Aquarium.

A board member of the Seaside Downtown Development Association, Chandler is the chief organizer of lighting the lampposts on Broadway. "Our lighting goes up before Thanksgiving and will stay up until New Years. We have 63 poles that our volunteer committee decorates," he says. "We go up as far as the Turnaround. When we redesigned our downtown core, one of our requests was electrical outlets: The poles on Broadway have outlets at the top, and at the Turnaround they are at the bottom."

The city of Seaside also lights the lampposts along U.S. Highway 101 and at City Hall.

At Broadway and Holladay Drive, the overhead lighting display, known by locals as the Big Swag, is a memorial to Dolna Mespelt, the first executive director of the Seaside Downtown Development Association, who died in 2003. The display features a garland of electronic starfish and dancing fish blowing bubbles. Community donations funded the project. "When she passed away a bunch of people contributed to the display," said Chandler.

In Cannon Beach, a wide selection of seasonal activities spanning from mid November to the end of December create Haystack Holidays. Individual shop owners set Hemlock Street aglow with festive decorations, and Dec. 5 saw



Photo by Joshua Bessex

Downtown Astoria comes aglow with holiday spirit thanks to the hard work of the Christmas Club, Astoria Downtown Historic District Association, and many volunteers.

the annual Lamp Lighting Ceremony at Sandpiper Square downtown.

This year, Cannon Beach has called residents and businesses to showcase their sparkle with lighting displays in a contest. You can vote for your favorites online at <http://tinyurl.com/CBlights>; voting closes at noon Friday, Dec. 18. Winners will be announced at intermission of "Once Upon A Mattress" at the Coaster Theatre.

In Manzanita, turning off U.S. Highway 101 onto Laneda Avenue, the large conical tree went up in the town square on Thanksgiving weekend. On Dec. 3, a mighty wind gust picked it up and toppled it — but not for long! The Manzanita Christmas Decoration Committee of three — April Eckstrom, who owns Manzanita Sweets, and Larry and Janice Zagata, who own Manzanita's Ocean Inn — had the tree uprighted in no time.

"This year we have brand new lights in the shape of snowflakes that were funded by the Manzanita Business Alliance and the city," Eckstrom said. "We all come together to bring the joys of Christmas to our area: the church, the li-



Photo by Joshua Bessex

Lanterns and lights cover streetlights in downtown Astoria.

brary, and the North County Recreation District; we're all part of a three-village affair, Wheeler, Nehalem and Manzanita."

One of the advantages of living in smallish coastal towns is the feeling of community that prevails. Nowhere and at no time is that evident more clearly than during the December holiday season. Visions of sugar plums begin to dance in our heads, as bright lights begin to appear in our town's main streets, dressing them up to delight children whatever our ages.

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