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Light Up Middletown 2003 Report

**WHAT:**

A community drive-through holiday light display designed to showcase Smith Park and the Middletown area while raising funds to improve Middletown's parks.

Major light displays, lighted trees and luminaries, with snowflakes scattered along the driving trail.

**WHEN:**

November 28 through December 31, 2003 (34 days of operation – 1 fewer days than in 2002 – 5 fewer than the 39 days of operation in 2001 – highest number) 5:30-9:30 pm every day, regardless of weather.

**HOW:**

A volunteer organization.

Light Up Middletown is a 501 (c) 3 tax exempt organization with the stated purpose of raising funds to improve the public parks of Middletown. The month-long event staged at Smith Park is designated as the fund-raising operation.

Several Middletown area people, organizations and businesses volunteer time and equipment to prepare, staff, maintain and store the displays.

City of Middletown crews help with their specialized equipment when needed, but the majority of the labor is performed by volunteers.

“The Grandpa Gang” erected the displays. Once the event opened, the Grandpas took turns maintaining and opening and closing the display each evening. The same group is dismantling, repairing and storing the displays for next year in donated space in a local warehouse.

Each evening of operation, 2-3 volunteers representing an area non-profit organization greeted guests, asked their home county and the number in the vehicle. Volunteers also kept an eye on

the operation. Girls Scout GRC Troop 3653, Monroe Booster Club, Middletown High School Musical Arts Association, Newspapers in Education, Garfield Alternative High School Activities, Middletown High School Soccer Booster Club and individual volunteers staffed the entrance gate. Volunteers in the year 2003 worked in all kinds of weather, some of it bitterly cold.

The Grinch, Santa Claus and Let's Read Together's Buddy Bear made appearances.

### **FUNDS:**

No admission was charged but donation boxes were available at both the entrance and exit. Donations are used to pay for additional displays, replace and repair current displays, install electrical service to Smith Park and shared with volunteer organizations who staff the 34 days of operation—136 hours. Each volunteer organization staffing the entrance received \$60 for their treasury for each night of staffing. Individual volunteers receive no payment.

Thanks to those who donated as they toured Light Up Middletown. All debts have now been paid and Light Up Middletown will purchase additional displays, make repairs and make a donation to the City of Middletown for park improvement.

Donations came in many forms: Cash, significant discounts from area suppliers, free use of equipment from businesses, free food for the construction crews...

And items in the donation box other than cash included:

- 1 Envelope with blank paper inside (same as last two years)
- 2 Notes from visitors
- 7 Car wash tokens
- 3 Religious brochure
- 94 Cans of food – green beans, corn, chicken soup, etc
- 10 Boxes of food – Jiffy mix, popcorn, etc.

### **PUBLIC AWARENESS:**

Many people learned of the event from newspaper, magazine, tv and radio news reports.

9 news releases were sent to magazines, newspapers, radio, tv and others

A \$2,400 grant from the Middletown Convention and Visitors Bureau allowed cable tv advertising in the northern Cincinnati/southern Butler County area. (Grants are to be used to attract out-of-town guests to local events.) Additional advertising listing several local events was placed by the Convention and Visitors Bureau in Ohio Magazine, Cincinnati Magazine and Dayton Daily News Go Guide.

Middletown Journal, Dayton Daily News, Cincinnati Enquirer listed Light Up Middletown in their entertainment guides. Middletown Journal ran several photos and articles during the season.

Outlets giving coverage included:

- Middletown Journal
- Dayton Daily News – Go Guide listing
- Cincinnati Enquirer – Weekend Guide listing
- WPFB
- TV Middletown
- Good News Magazine
- Senior Citizens Newsletter
- Special ad page in Middletown Journal

Time Warner Cable website – [www.aroundcinci.com](http://www.aroundcinci.com)

Ohio Magazine – advertising and article – by CVB

Dayton Daily News—Go Guide advertising - by CVB

Cincinnati Magazine – advertising – by CVB

Directional signs provided by the City of Middletown were placed along SR73, SR4 and SR122 leading to downtown Middletown. These professionally made metal signs replace the less attractive and more difficult to maintain plastic signs used in prior years. The new signs will be saved and used year after year.

Light Up Middletown continues to suggest, with some limited success to date, that other area organizations present lighted displays as a part of the Light Up Middletown event. Light Up Middletown volunteers will direct guests to other displays in the area. In 2002 and 2003, Light Up volunteers handed out flyers about the Live Nativity scene at a local church.

Light Up volunteers also handed out lists of local events for December and January. Maps, lists of restaurants and visitor guides were also available to any guest requesting information.

**STATISTICS:**

	2003	2002	2001	2000	1999
Total site donations	\$24,802	\$26,334	\$30,723	\$25,287	\$33,944
Other donations	\$11,650	\$50	\$5,435	\$14,310	\$62,233
Displays purchased	\$3,240	\$6,257	\$8,619	\$9,138	
Donations to volunteer workers' organizations	\$1,800	\$1,590	\$1,140	\$1,680	
Repairs and maintenance supplies	\$1,862	\$1,938	\$2,298	\$3,818	
Donation to City of Middletown for Parks	\$2,000	\$2,500	\$3,000	\$2,500	
Paid on debt	\$4,000	\$15,000	\$15,000	\$18,000	

NOTE: Not all expenses have been reported.

Light Up Middletown has donated to the City of Middletown electrical service installed in Smith Park valued at approximately \$120,000. Additional year-round lighting at the entrance has been installed using a \$2,500 donation made by Light Up. And \$3,500 has been set aside at the beginning of 2004 for future park improvements.

**VISITORS:**

People from nearby and far away places visited Light Up Middletown. Local citizens brought out-of-town guests to visit Light Up. Many, many families included their pets in the experience.

Raw totals are misleading since each Thanksgiving to New Year's Eve season is of a different length. For instance, the 2002 season was six days shorter than the 2001 season. The longest season was in 2001 – 39 days of operation.

	2003	2002	2001	2000	1999
Visitors	46,798	48,561	56,644	48,154	61,314 est.
Vehicles	14,007	14,781	17,266	15,018	20,438
Buses	32	32	48	31	19
No. people per vehicle	3.3	3.3	3.3	3.2	3.0 est
Donation per vehicle	\$1.77	\$1.78	\$1.78	\$1.68	\$1.66
Donation per person	\$.053	\$0.54	\$0.54	\$0.53	\$0.55 est
Percentage of vehicles from:					
Butler County	71%	74%	73%	74%	76%
Warren County	15%	14%	14%	13%	13%
Other Ohio Counties	12%	10%	11%	11%	10%
Other States	2%	2%	2%	2%	1%

Busiest night was:	11/28**	12/14*	12/15	12/1	12/4
	841 vehicles	819 Vehicles	791 vehicles	727 vehicles	1,262
	3,064 people	2786 people	2764 people	2,195 people	

\* Grand reopening of Central Avenue

\*\* Downtown tree lighting and parade

Least busy night was:	12/29	12/30	12/17	12/13	12/28
	99 vehicles	199 vehicles	166 vehicles	65 vehicles	165 vehicles
	302 people	559 people	555 people	198 people	
Highest donation night:	11/28	12/14	12/15	12/2	12/4
	\$1,727.24	\$1,651.15	\$1,541.55	\$1,551.94	\$2,139.37
Lowest donation night:	12/29	12/19	12/26	12/13	12/31
	\$175.29	\$269.24	\$266.04	\$145.75	\$186.15

Shifts in statistics

Guest vehicles came from :	2003	2002	% Change
Butler County	9,989	10,977	-9%
Warren County	2,045	2,023	+1%
Preble County	414	380	+9%
Hamilton County/Cincinnati	110	75	+47%
Montgomery County/Dayton	870	823	+6%
Other Ohio Counties	254	188	+35%
Other States	277	280	-1%

## **CONCLUSIONS:**

46,798 people enjoyed a tour through "Fantasyland." Reports from those who toured included many who returned to bring friends and visiting family. Many are making a tour of Light Up an annual tradition.

Local events use a multiplier of \$32 when estimating the impact on the local economy by each guest to an event. Those spending estimates include the cost of presenting the event, restaurant meals, gasoline, hotels, retail spending and taxes generated. Even lowering that estimate to take into account the type of event that does not encourage on-site spending at booths, etc. the guests to Light Up Middletown surely made some significant impact on the Middletown economy.

A part of the impact of Light Up Middletown is that other volunteer organizations are able to earn funds for their treasury while providing reliable staffing to greet guests, provide a "presence" and compile statistics.

The City of Middletown and the Convention and Visitors Bureau can boast of yet another fine event on the annual calendar.

An extensive electrical installation in Smith Park is available for use by other organizations for events.

A new tradition has begun with a winter event. It requires very few people to staff the event – 2-3 each evening.

Now that the original debt has been paid, more of the proceeds from each year's event will be used to upgrade Middletown City parks.

In this fifth year, little human vandalism was evident. What did occur was quickly repaired by the volunteer maintenance crew. The animal vandals, however, were persistent. Squirrels chewed through wiring on trees and a beaver is suspected of not only cutting down 11 trees around the pond but chewing the ropes used to anchor floating displays.

Staffing the entrance to the event is necessary. Staff members greet guests with a smile, listen to compliments and suggestions for improvements, provide subtle encouragement to drop a dollar or two in the donation box.

Many visitors chose to help through their donations. Many did not.

Since income is solely through donations, it is important to encourage donations from guests in each vehicle. While many vehicles toured without donation, and that is certainly acceptable, many others made larger donations - \$5, \$10, \$20 or more.

Several motor coaches toured the display this year as a part of a planned day in Middletown which often included stops to tour Bern's Greenhouse and take in the Taking Christmas to the Troops musical production by Rising Phoenix theatre. Many area retirement motor coaches made their usual trip or two through the display.

The average number of guests each evening was higher in past years. An average of 1,472 people in 448 vehicles toured the display each of the 33 evenings in 2002. In 2001, 1452 people in 443 vehicles toured. In 2003, 1,376 people in 412 vehicles toured the display each of the 34 nights of operation.

Overall attendance was down 4%, number of vehicles down 5% and donations down 6%.

With the assistance of additional advertising (cable tv, Ohio Magazine, Cincinnati Magazine and Dayton Daily News ads), organizers can only assume it is a sign of the area's economy. Statistical changes show that advertising outside Middletown did have some impact on the number of guests from other areas. By using Cable TV ads in the Cincinnati area, the number from Hamilton County jumped significantly – 47%. Still a small number of the total guest vehicles probably due to two other drive-through light operations near Cincinnati – Sharonville and Pyramid Hill in Hamilton.

The number of guest vehicles from outside the immediate area jumped 35%. Light Up organizers took several more calls than would be expected from people from well outside the immediate area – several mentioned seeing the information in Ohio Magazine, an ad and article placed by the CVB.

## **FUTURE PLANS:**

Volunteers estimate that approximately 1/3 of the visitors donate nothing as they tour. Many fail to see the connection between the continuation and improvement of the event and their donation.

Arranging a donation opportunity at both the entrance and exit points has helped but other ways to encourage free will donations will be sought. One suggestion was to install a STOP sign at the entrance booth.

Additional displays will be added for next year. With debts paid in full, more funds will be available to purchase more spectacular displays.