

Strands of Christmas lights to be lit year-round

The Associated Press

The bare branches of downtown's trees become part of an illuminated sculpture as the strands of bulbs are woven through the limbs.

The meticulous task of stringing the lights is the unofficial signal to the start of a new season. Limb by limb. Bough by bough. At the end, 96 of the statuesque trees shine with glowing branches reaching like spires toward the sky.

The lighting of the trees takes place each year, usually with the help of volunteers.

But this year is different. A professional company strung the light-emitting diode, or LED, bulbs which will remain in place even after the cold months end.

Through public and private partnerships, a Portland-area company will maintain the year-round lights, said Jennifer Northam, events and public relations manager for the Downtown Walla Walla Foundation.

Northam said the goal is to keep the trees lit permanently, one more touch in enhancing the downtown experience for residents and visitors.

During the winter, the glowing lights add to the festive feeling of the season, she said. In summer, she believes it will fit well with the cozy charm of downtown.

"It highlights the fact that we have those beautiful trees," Northam said.

"Also we see it as contributing to a safety factor, as well," Northam said.

"I am convinced that it's going to be so much brighter."

The project is a partnership between a cluster of businesses/associations and the city. Four organizations have agreed to finance the project: Land Title of Walla Walla Inc., Key Technology, Community Bank and the Downtown Development Association, a local business association that pre-dates the Downtown Walla Walla Foundation.

Contributions from those organizations will pay the initial \$44,000 installation fee and subsequent annual maintenance by Beaverton, Ore.,-based A Light Up Company.

The business specializes in commercial lighting services. Over the last two years, the company has contracted with the Portland Business Alliance to manage the lighting program for the Portland downtown metro area. Last year the company lit 785 trees on 63 downtown blocks there.

Rather than using zip ties or wires, the company holds the lights in place with a flexible tape that allows for branch movement in winds, Northam said. Additionally, the tape doesn't restrict any limb growth, a condition that met the approval of the city's arborist, said Walla Walla Parks and Recreation Director Jim Dumont.

As a partner in the project, the city has diligently trimmed the trees to prepare the canopies for the lights. All electrical boxes at the base of the trees have been checked and upgraded as needed, Dumont said.

The city intends to cover the electrical costs for the lighting, added Tim McCarty, Walla Walla's Support Services director.

McCarty said the city has always paid electrical costs for the lighting, in part because with so many outlets used for a variety of needs, it's too difficult to determine individual uses and costs.

Though the lights will be year-round, McCarty said savings from the energy-efficient bulbs could actually decrease the city's bill.

Earlier this year the city upgraded its stop lights and signals from incandescent to LED. McCarty said the six-year payoff on that project indicates that the LED lights are roughly 20 percent or less of the cost of incandescent lights.