



City of Arts & Innovation

News Release

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City of Riverside Approves Changes to 2020 Festival of Lights

City will devote \$60,000 to support scaled-down event

RIVERSIDE, Calif. – With revenues down as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and large gatherings currently not allowed in California, the City of Riverside will scale back its participation in the 2020 Mission Inn Hotel & Spa Festival of Lights.

The City Council voted unanimously on Tuesday (8/4) to spend \$60,000 to support a lower cost version of what has been Riverside’s signature event for more than 25 years. Since 2016, the City’s expenses have ranged from \$378,000 to \$825,000, and revenues have ranged from \$453,195 to \$734,739.

The decision comes as the City and the historic hotel are wrestling with factors outside their control that make it impossible to enjoy a traditional Mission Inn Hotel & Spa Festival of Lights, both from a financial standpoint and to protect public health.

“The Festival of Lights is a much-loved Riverside tradition,” Mayor Rusty Bailey said. “I look forward to a time when we can gather together again as a community to celebrate the holidays in this special way, but we have to make responsible decisions, even when they are difficult.”

Among the factors playing into the decision were the expectation of a second wave of COVID-19 this fall and winter during flu season, the public’s health, and the expected increase in cost for providing personal protection equipment (PPE) supplies for staff, vendors, and volunteers, as well as the cost of creating social distancing measures and the likely need for additional security and staffing.

The event typically kicks off with a Switch-On Ceremony, complete with an exciting countdown and fireworks show, that attracts 75,000 people to downtown Riverside the Friday after Thanksgiving, then continues through the holidays with programming such as music and dance performances, food vendors, and more. Private security guards and Riverside police officers patrol the event.

However, to suppress the spread of COVID-19, the state is not allowing large gatherings, and it is unknown whether that restriction will be lifted by late November. In addition, the City of Riverside,

like all local governments, is facing a challenging financial future as a result of business, hospitality and other revenue-generating activities ceasing or dramatically slowing for the past five months.

The lower-cost model for the 2020 festival includes some holiday décor in the area around the Mission Inn Hotel & Spa, including holiday-themed selfie stations, three holiday trees, large ornaments, a sleigh, bows and garland on lights and bridges, and an assortment of holiday-themed light displays, in addition to the lights that are placed on the Mission Inn Hotel & Spa. But there will be no Switch-On Ceremony, programming, entertainment or attractions, no vendors and no horse carriages.

A map of the low-cost layout that will be in effect this year can be found at:

<https://riversideca.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=8685202&GUID=6E4C21DB-4E80-4020-A8D7-EE9559F034F9>

Other options included cancelling the event entirely; holding a no-cost event with minimal decor; spending \$250,000 on additional lighting and decorations; or trying to bring back most, but not all, of the vendors and attractions for \$575,000, knowing that revenue from sponsorships, vendors, parking and other fees would be substantial lower than in past years.

A representative of the historic hotel, David Bristow, said at the City Council meeting that Inn owners Duane and Kelly Roberts are committed to having lights at the Mission Inn this year, but an exact description has not been announced.

Like all hospitality businesses, the hotel has been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. It was closed for several weeks, but now is welcoming guests and serving food from two restaurants in outdoor seating only.

“The Mission Inn Hotel & Spa and the Greater Riverside Chambers of Commerce have been key partners in producing the Festival of Lights,” Mayor Pro Tem Steve Hemenway said. “We are grateful for their creative efforts and continued collaboration to ensure this modified version of one of Riverside’s world-class, signature events can continue in these unprecedented times.”

City staff will work on a Home for the Holiday Box of some of the festival favorites that families and visitors can enjoy in the comfort of their homes or send to friends and family. More information will be available in the next month.

For the latest information and resources regarding COVID-19 -- www.RiversideCA.gov/COVID-19