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City to light up for new week-long holiday event

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Hundreds flock to Fountain Square Park to attend the City of Bowling Green season on Friday, Dec. 3, 2021. (Reed Mattison for the Bowling Green Daily News)

Reed Mattison

Telia Butler doesn't remember making many Christmas memories featuring festive decor and bright lights while growing up in Bowling Green.

"I don't even have memories of window shopping downtown, because downtown was not the same place in the '90s and early 2000s as it is now," the city's downtown development coordinator told the Daily News.

Butler is hopeful that a bright, shiny and new holiday collaboration between more than a dozen local entities will be just the spark the city needs to create those memories for younger generations.



Expanding on the early December tradition of "Downtown Lights Up," when the heart of Bowling Green is set ablaze with Christmas lights, "Light Up BGKY," announced Wednesday, will spread a warm, incandescent glow all around the city.

“I want everyone in and around Bowling Green to be able to create these traditions and bring back what we’ve lost,” Butler said about the week-long slate of festivities.

Besides a bevy of holiday events, the announcement comes paired with the launch of lightupbgky.org. The site features an interactive map of light displays located all around the city for quick reference when families are planning their holiday sightseeing.

Households and neighborhood organizations can add their own festive setups to the grid, as long as folks are comfortable with their address going on the public map.

Butler encouraged those interested in submitting their light displays to check with their HOA before uploading to the website as it could lead to excess neighborhood traffic.

She shared that the idea for Light Up BGKY originally came from Amy Hardin, executive director of the Med Center Health Foundation, who wanted to move the foundation’s annual “Make the Season Bright” event up a week to coincide with Downtown Lights Up.

The two got to talking and began to form a plan of having something holiday-related going on from Black Friday until the annual Bowling Green Jaycees Christmas Parade on Dec. 2.

“How cool would it be if this was a weeklong event for the community?” Hardin recalled thinking.

The festivities begin at 4 p.m. Monday, Nov. 27. Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni and WKU mascot Big Red will cut a ceremonial ribbon in front of a lit-up Cherry Hall.

The Med Center Health Foundation's Make the Season Bright event at the Hospitality House takes place the following day, complete with live music, a visit from Santa, cookie decorating and a scavenger hunt.

"On that night, there will be a flip of the switch and the house will be lit," Hardin said. "We invite the community to purchase a light at the house for as little as \$10 in memory or honor of someone they love."

All proceeds from the event will go to the Hospitality House, a place where family members and caretakers of patients can stay free of charge and still be within walking distance of the hospital.

Wednesday, Nov. 29, includes the annual Christmas marketplace at the Riverview at Hobson Grove Historic House Museum.

Both floors of the museum section of the Victorian home, as well as the basement, will be filled with vendors and artisans from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Hobson family descendant George Anna McKenzie will be on hand for a cookbook signing, the museum's shop will be open and the day will also include a bake sale.

While the home won't be lit up with flashy neon light bulbs like the rest of town, a period-appropriate glow will still be present.

"We do very traditional decorating," said Brooke Westcott-Peterson, the museum's executive director. "We'll probably have some lamps lit at the marketplace, maybe some candles."

All vendor spaces have been filled and the event will be free and open to the public. Peterson said a trip to the historic venue is a good way to pick up some decoration inspiration for visitors' own homes.

"We do things a little bit differently than people do now in 2023," Peterson said. "Fresh greenery and beautiful candles and the fruit that they would have decorated with back then."

While not connected to Light Up BGKY, the historic home will also be holding free candlelight tours on Dec. 9 from 4:30 to 7:30 p.m.

On Nov. 29, the Capitol Theatre will host free showings of the classic Christmas film "It's a Wonderful Life" at 2 and 6 p.m. The Capitol will be accepting new and unwrapped toys, as well as monetary donations, for Hope House Ministries.

The following day, Nov. 30, marks the Historic RailPark and Train Museum's "Light Up the Depot" event.

Executive director Jamie Johnson said this will be the first time the depot has ever been lit up for Christmas.

“We’ve been raising money all year long to be able to put Christmas lights on the roofline of the building and to outline all the railcars,” Johnson said. The campaign has raised about \$77,000 of its \$105,000 goal and the RailPark will continue to collect funds through the end of the year.

The festivities begin at 4 p.m. and will feature a ribbon cutting, a proclamation reading, a Christmas choir, hot chocolate and the raising of the American flag on a flagpole recently donated to the RailPark.

Friday, Dec. 1, features the Christmas on College Street celebration at Bowling Green City Hall, the Warren County Courthouse Christmas open house and a storytime meet-and-greet with the Grinch at the Capitol.

Notable downtown locations – Circus and Fountain Square, the SoKY Ice Rink and SKyPAC – will all be lighting up that evening. Fountain Square businesses will deck out their storefronts for a window decorating contest and local bars and restaurants are encouraged to create seasonal cocktails and specials.

The annual Jaycees Christmas Parade will take place Dec. 2, along with the Mistletoe Market at SoKY Marketplace’s Historic Venue on 7th. Bowling Green’s Reindeer Farm will hold an ice sculpting event on Dec. 3.

If that wasn't enough, UnSeen BG will also offer a "Ghost of Christmas Past" tour at select dates throughout the week, which will be announced at a later time.

Butler said that even if you miss the events themselves, you can still visit the light displays of participating venues throughout the holiday season.

"Establishing this week of full light-ups; that's more Christmas things and holiday things to do with your family," Butler said. "That's really what it boils down to It's establishing a new tradition."

She said Bowling Green might not be thought of as a winter wonderland destination location, "but we could be, and we're growing on it."

More information about Light Up BGKY events can be found at lightupbgky.org.