



Downtown Detroit Partnership, Inc.

INNOVATION

The purpose of Detroit Aglow has always been to provide supplemental lighting during the darkest months in order to improve real and perceived safety and encourage people to visit small shops and restaurants. Officially kicking off with a tree lighting ceremony in Campus Martius Park, the ceremony has grown from a few thousand attendees when it began in 2013 to over 100,000 in 2019. The ceremony serves to connect and celebrate community, kick off a season of programming and encourage people to experience an inviting and exciting downtown. The success of the tree lighting ceremony and subsequent lighting activities play a critical role in creating a vibrant and sustainable downtown. Perceptions of Downtown Detroit have improved greatly during the last 15 years and the entire metropolitan region benefits from the positive impressions and sense of community inspired by the ceremony.

Beginning in 2018, DDP demonstrated increased internal capacity and collaboration through the winter lighting program, which to date has delivered over 400 unique lighting fixtures, customized street pole lights and ground-level lighting displays throughout the downtown. The Parks and BIZ team collaborated on refreshing the comprehensive supplemental lighting project to leverage place-making best practices with practical safety concerns, installing 492,000 individual LED lights. The ground-level lighting displays have proven to be extremely popular and have become destinations on their own.

OUTCOME

The outcomes from Detroit Aglow are threefold: improved lighting during the darkest months, increased visitorship due to place-making activations and lighting features, and greater retail, restaurant and entertainment sales. The impacts of these outcomes include greater economic sustainability, a safer community and continuously improved perceptions of the downtown and city.

The one-evening tree lighting ceremony and Light Up Beacon Park have introduced thousands of new visitors to the City of Detroit and have become must-attend traditions. The lights in the city trees and the ground-level lighting features are displayed for 16 weeks; the Christmas tree is lit for six-weeks, dismantled in mid-January. These continuously attract visitors throughout the season. More people in a well-lit downtown creates the environment that deters crime.

From 2015-2018, the BIZ issued an annual perceptions survey and report that demonstrated the region's thoughts about the downtown and city. Safety, cleanliness, lighting and attractiveness have improved every year. This in turn drives greater civic pride and reverses the negative perceptions that have plagued Detroit for decades.

In regards to greater sustainability, both downtown businesses and DDP operations have had increased revenue; DDP earned revenue from the rink at Campus Martius and restaurant concessions have increased annually during the last five years. This is sustained from an increase in both employee and residential populations; the downtown population has increased 39% between 2011 and 2018 while over 3,600 residential units have been added into the downtown inventory.

EXECUTION

The various departments within DDP work in tandem to light up Downtown Detroit. To accomplish these goals, DDP coordinates logistics and safety with dozens of local, state and federal agencies to ensure a safe tree lighting event that attracts over 1 million visitors.

The BIZ has worked closely with the Public Lighting Authority (PLA) to develop strategies to restore and improve lighting in the downtown. From 2015-2017, the PLA upgraded and added circuits, allowing for the BIZ to create opportunities for new lights. The BIZ also partnered with the Detroit People Mover to include winter lighting elements at select stations. Both of these efforts are part of a larger effort to survey dark spots, overlaid with crime hotspots, and add more lighting with private and public collaboration.

In 2016, DDP, the Conservancy and the BIZ moved into a shared space, enabling the organization to improve internal collaboration, leverage resources and strengthen operations. With input from the parks team, the BIZ enhanced the 2018 supplemental lighting program with placemaking features and custom designs, including the interactive light displays, the DETROIT lights in Grand Circus Park and the custom light pole decorations that dazzle day and night throughout the downtown.

REPRESENTATION

The programming within the parks represents the great diversity within Metro Detroit, attracting people of all ages, socio-economic status, race and creed. The tree lighting ceremony spotlights local talent, including youth choirs, local figure skating clubs and dozens of small business vendors. Throughout the year, the parks team works closely with numerous partners and community non-profit organizations, many of which are highlighted during the tree lighting ceremony, including the kick off of the Salvation Army's Red Kettle Campaign.

Unlike lighting displays within zoos and other parks, the lights and experiences in Downtown Detroit are free. The amenities include several warming tents in Cadillac Square, Campus Martius Park and Beacon Park. The ice skating rink is priced affordably when compared to other urban outdoor rinks and DDP offers numerous discounts, including one to downtown residents.

REPLICATION

Recognizing that lighting up a neighborhood or a downtown during the holidays is not a unique concept, the DDP team worked together to leverage placemaking best practices while expanding public safety. Together we decided upon two main elements: a customized street pole design that provides a uniform look and larger ground-level lighting displays that spark joy and civic pride. Of these displays, the seven-letter DETROIT lights are the most popular. They can be moved relatively easily with a small crew.

In 2018, the DETROIT lights were placed in Grand Circus Park, the quietest and least programmed downtown park. The lights immediately created Instagrammable moments. In 2019, the DETROIT lights were placed on the Gratiot-Randolph Plaza that connects the Greektown Neighborhood to the Central Business District. The lights were later moved in late-February to the north end of Campus Martius Park adjacent to the ice skating rink. This placement proved very popular for photos and combined with promotions, drove strong attendance to the rink during a traditionally slow period.

These efforts can be easily replicated by other communities with just their name in lights. At DDP, we further customized lights to reflect the colors of our major sports teams.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

Because DDP is a separate entity from the City of Detroit, the lighting program is complex from a project management standpoint as DDP solely manages but does not own the infrastructure used for lighting fixtures. Upon expansion of the program in 2018, several considerations needed to be made due to the drastic increase in the amount of product and locations. The team needed to identify locations for staging and storage of set up and take down equipment, locate and test all available electrical infrastructure, and establish a team that could help with regular assessments and servicing of the lighting.

Unpredictable weather conditions, aging infrastructure and the need to acquire several permits for installation from multiple entities can often delay the installation timeline. To ensure timely delivery, DDP begins installation one month in advance even though only two weeks are required. DDP also builds an integrated team of servicers so that trouble-shooting can be resolved efficiently throughout the lighting season. The service team included members of the BIZ ambassador team, installer, electricians and individuals from the public lighting departments. Because issues are reported directly to the entire team, DDP deploys the best person necessary to fix it, saving money and time.