

Head Grandpa happy with first weekend at Christmas Wonderland

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - Christmas Wonderland at Rock Spring Park has been a holiday tradition in the River Bend since 2001.

The mile and a half of Christmas decorations and colorful lights sponsored by local businesses and community organizations is created every year by the **Grandpa Gang**. The Grandpa Gang is a group of local volunteers who would describe themselves as "grandpas." This year's **Head Grandpa Al Cowgill** said he was grateful for the amount of new volunteers the group had to create the elaborate displays this year. In 2015, the

group was dwindling with less than 10 members, most of whom were approaching or over 80 years old. This year, however, the gang had some relatively younger faces among the nearly 30 volunteers.

"We had between 15-19 people there at least every day," Cowgill said. "We have quite a few fresh faces this year, and some of them are younger guys. It's nice to see some enthusiasm again."

Cowgill said this year's Christmas Wonderland has been in the works since Sept. 12. During that time, the Grandpa Gang decorated the mile and a half of roadway with holiday cheer. He said this year, guests to the park will see some new improvements, including cascading lights at the waterfall, the second tunnel of lights and even in the creek bed. The lights are in motion and create the effect of a cascade. The Spider-Man display has also been updated.

"They changed the appearance of the Spider-Man," Cowgill said. "They totally redid it. They took the mini-lights out and put LED lights in. It's more visible now."

Electronic controls were also added to the iconic jumping reindeer, an improvement Cowgill said made the display much more reliable.

Christmas Wonderland opened for visitors on Saturday, Nov. 26. During that evening, Cowgill said 1,231 people drove through. He did not have records for the next day, but estimated from the donations as many as 800 people may have taken the time to enjoy the lights.

Officially, Christmas Wonderland is free to enjoy, but there is a suggested donation of \$7 a car. That money is collected and given to various local charities at the end of the season. Cowgill said many local groups apply for a portion of those donations, and the Grandpa Gang allocates those funds after the display is finished. Last year, Cowgill said more than \$40,000 was given across the community to food pantries, church groups, animal care facilities and scouting groups, among others. Some of the money is returned to the **Alton Parks and Rec Department**. Cowgill said the Grandpa Gang also contributes some of the donations to both the **Halloween Parade** and Independence Day fireworks display.

An estimated 40,000 people will take the tour through Christmas Wonderland, Cowgill said.

Previous to 2001, Christmas Wonderland was called **Celebration of Christmas**. That display has been in the park since the late 1980s.

