

Alton thwarted its Grinch: Christmas Wonderland is a-go!

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON – Christmas Wonderland has been reinstated in Alton, thanks to promises from Alton Mayor Brant Walker to the Wonderland's volunteer crew, the Grandpa Gang.

Christmas Wonderland Board President Al Cowgill said Walker came to the group's board meeting Tuesday morning and told them the City of Alton would work to ensure no more wiring was stolen from them during the process of building the elaborate Christmas-themed, drive-through light display at Rock Spring Park. Theft of that wiring has been a continuous problem with the Grandpa Gang, Cowgill said. This year, as much as 2,000 feet of wiring was stolen, at an estimated value of \$1,400. Because of that, Cowgill and the Grandpa Gang were going to cancel the Christmas Wonderland attraction this year.

Money, however, was not the issue, Cowgill said, despite previous years' wiring thefts totaling upwards of \$6,000. He said the event was canceled due to what he considered to be a "lack of security."

"We have enough money to buy the wire," Cowgill said Tuesday morning. "It wasn't a money situation, it was a security situation. Money is not the issue, it never was the issue. The issue was we were getting robbed so much, it felt like a futile situation. We were sick of feeling like we were there spinning our wheels. Enough was enough."

To assuage the Grandpa Gang's valid concerns, Walker told Cowgill the city would assist with bucket trucks and electricians from the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) as well as increased security and concrete blocks around the gates preventing people from driving around it to get into the park after hours.

Walker told Riverbender.com the city was committed to ensuring Christmas Wonderland continues in Alton at Rock Spring Park. He said work on the lights will continue Wednesday, adding he was thankful for the city and Home Depot jumping aboard this mission to reinstate a holiday tradition in the Riverbend.



“The Grinch is not going to steal Christmas in Alton,” Walker said. “We're going to begin again tomorrow. We're going to make it happen.”

By next year, Walker said the city is looking at trenching at the park, so wires for the wonderland will be securely placed underground – making it much harder for thieves to attempt to ruin the event.

While Cowgill said money is not an issue, local business owner Eddie Sholar, Jr. offered to cover the expenses of the stolen wire. Local musician, Erin Jo Paddlefoot, is also working with her husband, Mike Weber, and the entertainment staff of Bottle and Barrel to create a benefit show there the night before Thanksgiving with proceeds going to the Grandpa Gang and Christmas Wonderland.

“There's something just so inherently sad about Christmas being canceled,” Paddlefoot said in a Facebook message. “It's like you can just feel the disappointment of kids and families throughout the Riverbend Area.”

After receiving news the tradition will continue to run through 2018, she said the show will continue, with funds for it going toward the Grandpa Gang to help fund wire trenching or to Rock Spring Park to get new playground equipment.

That show is set to take place at Bottle and Barrel in Alton on Nov. 21.

Countless other people have called and messaged Riverbender.com seeking ways they can help the Grandpa Gang bring back Christmas, offering everything from volunteer labor to establishing a GoFundMe page to covering the costs of lost wire.

Cowgill said the Grandpa Gang has the funding and now the labor necessary to make this year's light show as good as every other year before it. Volunteers from the Grandpa Gang work at the park from 8 a.m. - noon, and he said city workers may stay until 3 p. m. until the displays are in proper functioning order.