

# Making the Most of the Holiday Season in Your Community

*Triad Associates*

It is that special time of year again! Unfortunately, the holiday season seems to arrive quicker with each passing year. Yet this festive occasion provides many opportunities for communities to showcase their downtowns and commercial centers. There are also some challenges and pitfalls around which it is important to be sensitive and informed. This article highlights some of these opportunities and challenges.

For many people, shopping downtown is no longer the holiday ritual it once was. In fact, many people are probably not familiar with the shopping opportunities that exist locally. This is true for large cities as well as small towns. The holiday season provides the chance for your community to profile your downtown. Let people know the types of merchants who are located there. Through special festivals and events, municipalities can draw people who may otherwise not visit to their downtown or retail centers. This gives shop keepers the chance to showcase their wares and to join in a coordinated effort with other store owners to extend their store hours, partner in a marketing effort or otherwise maximize their exposure and that of the downtown. It gives the municipality the chance to distinguish itself from other communities – perhaps by highlighting some extraordinary decorations or drawing attention to a special retail niche or annual event.

There are a number of ways this can be accomplished. Special events can include a Christmas parade, evening carolers, sidewalk concerts, holiday food festivals, costumed activities, carriage rides or other events that promote “old Christmas” or another custom or traditional celebration in your town. Many people are seeking family oriented events that they can attend, and the holidays offer the perfect family opportunity. Special decorations, lights and lots of sidewalk activity are fascinations for young children.

The holidays also give the community and merchants the opportunity to track local sales. By coordinating special shopping events, discounts and other holiday bargains with targeted marketing initiatives and advertisements that require the shopper to present a special number, coupon or flyer in order to take advantage of a special offer, retailers, chambers of commerce and “Main Street” coordinators can get a good sense of where the community’s market exists and what the profile of the market might be.

However, there are obvious precautions that need to be taken during the holidays in order to avoid legal challenges and pitfalls. For starters, communities must be sensitive to the fact that “the holidays” represent a wide range of ethnic, cultural and religious activities and traditions. This fact, of course, is related to the Constitutional Doctrine espousing the separation of church and state.

Some towns have faced lawsuits stemming from their displays of religious symbols on municipal property. An October 1, 2009 letter written by William G. Dressel, Jr., the Executive Director of the New Jersey League of Municipalities, helps to clarify this situation. He writes: “A display containing symbols from different religions, as well as secular symbols of the holidays, is likely constitutional. The constitutionality of such a

display is further enhanced if a secular message is also included.” Mr. Dressel further states: “The secular symbols and messages should not be included merely as an attempt to legitimize the religious aspects. To that end, they should be at least as prominent as any religious displays.” You may read this letter on the League’s website at [www.njslom.org/ml100109-holiday-displays.html](http://www.njslom.org/ml100109-holiday-displays.html).

The law in this area is complex. It would be wise to contact your municipal attorney regarding your holiday display to determine its legality and avoid any unnecessary lawsuits.

Another consideration is planning for your holiday event. Large events require advanced planning to run smoothly. A coordinator is your best bet for ensuring your event is successful. Preparation is critical to handling issues such as the extra traffic and parking that the event might bring with it. Further, an event coordinator can plan for additional pedestrian traffic, the need for security and the necessary publicity to attract visitors and shoppers.

Extra funds may also be required for security during extended shopping hours in your business district. To compete with big box stores and the mall, local businesses need to be available to customers later than their normal business hours. Providing a safe environment will assist your downtown and alleviate any fears pedestrians may have walking through your downtown at night.

And what about the cost of electricity for your municipal light display? Try trading in your old municipal lighting for new energy saving lights. Certain commercial grade LED lights can save 80 – 90% in electricity costs. They are also fireproof and shatterproof. Obviously there is an initial cost, but over time these energy efficient bulbs will save your municipality in electricity costs.

Certainly there are extra costs in hosting an event, having holiday displays and extended shopping hours in your downtown. However, your municipality can reap the benefits. Promoting your municipality through the holidays can bring in tourists, shoppers and visitors to your downtown. A successful event can bring families back year after year. If you are really short on funds to host your event, try recruiting volunteers to help with labor or partnering with local businesses to help defray costs. Get everyone on board and make it a team effort. Building community within your municipality will certainly provide holiday spirit throughout your town, no matter what the size of your holiday budget.

Happy Holidays!

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*Triad Associates is currently the League’s Grant Consulting Firm. Their firm, which is known for its expertise in community and economic development, including strategic planning, redevelopment, acquisition, relocation and funding, has brought diverse plans and projects to life by generating more than \$580,000,000 for over 120 public, private and nonprofit clients throughout the Northeast region since 1978. Every member of the*

*Triad team is personally committed and dedicated to the success of its clients and the projects that benefit communities.*