

# *San Diego Union-Tribune*

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## **Record attendance at December Nights**

New attractions and expanded hours helped the December Nights event at Balboa Park set an all-time attendance record over the weekend.

An estimated 150,000 visitors patronized the free two-day event, which in previous years had averaged about 100,000 visitors to listen to holiday music and visit museums at no charge.

Perhaps the most satisfied patron was A.J. Fucher, a romantic suitor from Lakeside. Fucher organized an elaborate diversion to surprise his girlfriend, Carrie Collins, with a marriage proposal from center stage at the Organ Pavilion on Saturday night.

In addition to traditional holiday music on three stages, the festival's expanded format included a carnival with rides for children, booths selling crafts and gifts, and a restaurant row set up under canopies on the Cabrillo Bridge.

Attractions were spread out across the park rather than clustered around the Organ Pavilion. Also, the once nighttime-only event was expanded into the daytime.

"We had at least 50 percent more and, in my estimation, we would have had even more had there not been rain showers on Saturday night," said event director Teresa McTighe.

As usual, parking was scarce and traffic was as snarled as last year's string of Christmas tree lights.

But both of those problems were lessened by a shuttle-bus service and 800 motorists who paid for valet parking.

Lines at food concessions and gift booths were light to tolerable.

"I think we cut down on the lines tremendously," said McTighe.

One glitch occurred Friday when the Cabrillo Bridge food-tasting event featuring cuisine from 16 restaurants sold out at 8 p.m., two hours earlier than it was supposed to conclude.

Despite some patrons being inconvenienced, event organizers viewed the tasting as a resounding success. Because of a shortened planning period -- December Nights was almost canceled due to a lack of money -- there wasn't time to recruit more restaurants. Next year, organizers intend to triple the number.

The holiday event, which began 27 years ago and was known for years as Christmas on the Prado, was canceled in July but resurrected at the urging of Mayor Dick Murphy and Deputy

Mayor Toni Atkins. The San Diego Union-Tribune and San Diego Chargers donated \$50,000 each to save the festival.

The city granted the Business Improvement District Council a three-year contract to organize and operate the event. This year, it cost approximately \$160,000.

This year the festival made a profit of approximately \$30,000, which will be used as seed money for next year's festival, McTighe said.

Although some of the 40 museums and cultural institutions at the park sacrificed potential revenue by offering free admission from 5 to 9 p.m. each night, they were pleased by the increased exposure, said David Lang, executive director of the Balboa Park Cultural Partnership. The museums gave away approximately \$700,000 in free admissions and had an additional \$50,000 in operating expenses, he said.

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