

FROM THE BALBOA PARK BEAT

Ice skating is in, parking is out at December Nights

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Balboa Park's December Nights will put the "ice" in nice this year with the debut of a skating rink at the holiday festival this weekend.

At \$5, including skate rental, the ice rink may be the best deal in town – aside from December Nights itself, now going on 31 years as the park's admission-free holiday treat.

Most familiar details won't change. Park museums will have their open doors at no charge Friday and Saturday from 5 to 9 p.m. Choirs and dancing troupes will take the Spreckels Organ Pavilion stage both days, and the 32 international cottages of the House of Pacific Relations will serve ethnic food from around the world.

Organizers expect up to 300,000 people over the two days. As a result, park officials aren't even uttering the word "parking" this year.

In other words, they don't want people to attempt parking anywhere near Balboa Park, which typically achieves gridlock early each day of the event.

Free parking and shuttles will be available at the downtown County Administration Building and City College. For \$3, parkgoers can leave their cars at Tailgate Park near the downtown ballpark and catch a shuttle.

To address crowding, organizers are trying to spread attractions into new park locations.

For example, the landmark Moreton Bay Fig tree in front of the San Diego Natural History Museum will be lighted with a display of holiday colors. Old Globe Theatre technicians are lending their expertise, as the Globe's participation in the festival will be more limited because of theater construction.

- [Map of December Nights attractions](#) (PDF)
- [Report by the Balboa Park Cultural Partnership on creating a new charity to help run park](#) (PDF)
- [Draft of Balboa Park Committee's report on park governance options](#) (Word)

For more details on December Nights and other happenings in Balboa Park, go to [December Nights](#)

There also will be fewer vendors than in years past, to allow more space for visitors to navigate the festival.

December Nights has become a money-maker for the park in recent years. Since 2004, when the city took over management, the event has netted \$135,000.

The money sits in a reserve account in case the festival can't cover costs. It's also intended as a nest egg for a Balboa Park centennial celebration in 2015.

Last December, despite two days of rain, the event earned \$41,000 for the reserve fund.

This year, sponsorship is down. Barona, the top-billed benefactor since 2005, has scaled back to \$25,000 in cash and \$25,000 in services. In past years, Barona donated as much as \$100,000.

Conservancy support

A major Balboa Park stakeholder has cast a vote for creating a nonprofit conservancy to help run the park.

The Balboa Park Cultural Partnership, representing 24 of the largest park institutions, is suggesting that a charitable group should be formed to take over some tasks of running the 1,200-acre park.

The group, which wrote a nine-page position paper this fall, says: "The intent would be to start small and demonstrate a record of successful management, governance and funding activities."

But down the line, "possible transfer of greater management authority and control to the new public benefit entity should be explored."

There's a growing movement to change the way Balboa Park is run, after some park benefactors suggested that the city's financial problems have resulted in neglect. An independent report released in January listed \$238 million in major and minor fix-it projects that mostly have no funding.

Three models are being studied: a joint-powers authority with San Diego County and other cities; a new park district fueled by additional property taxes; or a nonprofit conservancy similar to the one that operates New York's Central Park.

But momentum is clearly behind the conservancy.

Mayor Jerry Sanders has asked the Balboa Park Committee, a city-appointed volunteer advisory group, to study the options. The committee's report is expected early next year.

The committee, too, is leaning toward conservancy. The latest draft of the committee's report backs formation of a charity that would be given some management power. But it also stresses that the city should retain ultimate control and continue funding the park at today's levels.

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