

Memorandum



Date: September 2, 2026
To: Buchanan Downtown Development Authority
From: Tony McGhee
Subject: Holiday Decorations

At the August DDA meeting, the Board started discussing Christmas decorations for downtown. With the amount of investment that has been made in downtown over the last couple of years, along with the opportunity we have to better utilize The Common during the holiday season, staff wanted to provide some additional information to help guide the discussion on what level of investment the DDA may want to consider moving forward.

The general concept we have been discussing is decorating approximately five blocks of the primary downtown area, along with making The Common and stage a significant focal point. The goal would not simply be to put up more Christmas lights. If we are going to make an investment in this, I think the goal should be to create a consistent Christmas feel throughout downtown that supports our businesses, gives people another reason to come downtown during November and December, and helps support the different holiday events and activities occurring throughout the season.

As we started looking at what other communities are spending, there is a very wide range. A lot of that comes down to whether the community already owns its decorations, whether City staff handles installation and removal, whether decorations are being purchased or leased, and how extensive of a program the community is trying to create. Probably more useful than looking at what much larger communities are spending is looking at smaller West Michigan communities that are closer to Buchanan in size and the type of downtown we have.

Comparable Communities

- Hastings is probably one of the better comparisons for what we are discussing. Their DDA budget included \$50,000 specifically for holiday decorations as part of an effort to replace and improve their downtown decorations. Their current program also includes holiday greenery throughout downtown planters. That is important for our discussion because Hastings was not simply paying to reinstall an existing

collection. They were making a larger investment into the actual decorations, which is closer to what we would be looking at doing in Buchanan.

- St. Joseph is obviously another useful comparison because of its proximity to us and the importance its downtown plays in the community. For the 2025/26 fiscal year, its DDA expenditures included \$3,170 for holiday greenery, \$9,400 for a holiday lighting tree project and \$8,050 for downtown pot decorations. There was also approximately \$2,450 spent on new downtown banners. Depending on what portions are considered part of the holiday program, that puts their documented seasonal downtown decorating expenditures in the range of approximately \$12,500 to more than \$20,000. St. Joseph uses a combination of decorations they own supplemented by a private contractor they pay to install lights on the light poles throughout the downtown.
- Grand Haven also utilizes a contracted downtown holiday lighting program. Their scope includes 53 downtown light poles decorated with fresh pine garland and white lights, along with ongoing maintenance throughout the holiday season and removal after the season. Their specifications also specifically encourage the reuse of lighting from year to year to help reduce future costs.

What I think these examples show is that there really are two different conversations. The first is what an established downtown spends each year to maintain, install, remove and add to decorations it already owns? The second is what it costs when a community decides it wants to make a significant improvement and purchase enough commercial quality decorations to materially change the appearance of its downtown? Buchanan is much closer to the second situation right now.

Approaches to Downtown Holiday Decoration Program

- **Basic Program: \$25,000 to \$35,000**
At this level, we could make a noticeable improvement over what we currently have, but we would need to be selective about where the money is spent. The focus would probably be consistent decorations along Front Street (downtown and top of the hill), Main Street and Days Avenue, improving The Common and stag and tree lighting.
- **Enhanced Downtown Program: \$45,000 to \$60,000**
At this level, we should be able to create a consistent treatment throughout the approximately downtown area and portion of Front Street at the top of the hill, purchase commercial quality decorations for the streetlights, add lighting and

greenery throughout the streetscape, make The Common a significant focal point and add one or two locations designed specifically as photo opportunities.

A very preliminary breakdown could look something like this:

- Commercial quality streetlight decorations: \$18,000 to \$25,000
- Tree lighting, garland and streetscape accents: \$6,000 to \$10,000
- The Common and stage area: \$5,000 to \$8,000
- Downtown photo or signature display: \$3,000 to \$5,000
- Electrical work, mounting hardware, replacement items and contingency: \$3,000 to \$5,000
- Labor – volunteers or contractual/combo of city staff and volunteers \$TBD

That puts the potential total somewhere in the \$35,000 to \$53,000 range. These are obviously planning numbers and not quotes. We would need to develop an actual scope and get pricing before knowing what the final cost would be. Based on what comparable communities are spending, however, I think they provide a reasonable range for the Board to use for discussion.

- Destination Level Program: \$65,000 to \$85,000 Plus

At this level, we would be moving beyond simply decorating downtown and starting to intentionally create “Christmas in Buchanan” as an experience that could potentially be marketed outside of the community.

That could include overhead lighting, more heavily decorated trees, larger illuminated displays, gateway pieces, multiple photo opportunities and a much more elaborate treatment of The Common.

Staff is not necessarily suggesting we need to start at this level but this option is provided to create an understanding what the different levels of investment could potentially create.

Purchase Versus Annual Expense

One of the bigger decisions I think the Board needs to consider is whether we want to make a larger investment up front and own the decorations or essentially pay for a decorating service every year.

If we spend \$35,000 in the first year but \$25,000 of that is purchasing decorations we can use for the next five or more years, that is a much different discussion than spending \$50,000 every year to basically recreate the same program.

The DDA would still need to budget money each year for installation, removal, maintenance, replacement lights, greenery and adding new pieces, but we would not be starting over every November.

This is an important distinction for the Board. A \$35,000 first year investment should not necessarily be viewed as creating a \$35,000 annual Christmas decoration budget. If done correctly, the hope would be that we could make a larger investment initially and then operate, maintain and gradually expand the program for substantially less in future years.

Moving Forward

If we move forward, I think there are a few things we should focus on.

First, there should be a consistent appearance throughout the full downtown than spend the money on a handful of expensive decorations scattered around town. Somebody coming into downtown should be able to tell there was an intentional plan behind how everything was decorated.

Second, The Common should be the primary focal point and the center of Christmas activity downtown. We already have the stage and gathering space, so I think it makes sense to take advantage of that investment and make it the centerpiece of the holiday decorations.

Third, whenever practical, we should purchase commercial quality decorations that the DDA owns and can continue using in future years.

The DDA should create at least one location that people specifically want to take pictures at and share. That becomes something residents use and enjoy, but it also becomes free marketing for downtown every time somebody posts a picture.

If we put the basic framework and major pieces in place this year, we can add to it every year and continue making it better. Over three or four years, that could allow the DDA to create something significant without having to make the entire investment at one time.

More importantly, it gives us an opportunity to create something that supports our downtown businesses during an important retail and restaurant season. The investment should not just be viewed as spending money on Christmas decorations. If we do it

correctly, it becomes another piece of creating activity downtown, bringing people into the district and giving them a reason to stay longer, walk around, eat, shop and come back.

At this point, the main thing staff is looking for from the Board is direction on what level of investment it is comfortable considering.

Based on that direction, the planning group can develop a more specific scope, inventory the number of poles, trees and other locations that could be decorated, verify the available electrical infrastructure, get actual pricing and bring options back to the DDA before any final purchase or contract is approved.

Requested Action

Direct staff to develop and solicit pricing for a 2026 downtown Christmas decorating program with a target budget of approximately \$30,000 and a not to exceed planning amount of \$35,000, with an emphasis on purchasing reusable commercial quality decorations and with any final purchases or contracts brought back to the DDA for approval.