

Trees In Alamitos Bay Start Holiday Cheer With Lights

By Amy Bentley-Smith

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East Long Beach residents know the holiday season is fast approaching the minute they see the dozens of triangular structures line Davies Launch Ramp.

When those structures are put in position in Alamitos Bay — and now Colorado Lagoon, Spinnaker Cove and Rainbow Harbor downtown — people know Thanksgiving is just around the corner. And when the lights of the Trees in the Bay get turned on tonight (Thanksgiving), there's no doubt that Santa's on his way.

The tradition of Trees in the Bay began in 1949 when resident Don May put a live Christmas tree on a float and set it in Alamitos Bay. In 1953 the first of the now familiar triangular wooden structures was used instead of a live tree.

The trees became such a special holiday fixture in the bay that when the city cut the program out of its budget in the 1970s, residents came to the rescue and began paying the city for necessary maintenance and to cover the electricity bill. Today three community associations finance the trees in their neighborhoods. The original Trees in the Bay — from the Appian Way Bridge to Leeway Sailing Center — are paid for out of a special Partners for Parks fund that people can always contribute to.

Parks, Recreation and Marine Department maintenance bureau staff do the rest.

“It's pretty involved,” said Christine Sanburg, superintendent of preventative maintenance. “We start on it after Labor Day — painting, repairing, assembling and putting the lights on them — to get them out on time.”

A few weeks prior to Thanksgiving the process of positioning the trees in the bay begins. Sanburg said the trees are towed by boat into the bay.

“It's a Christmas tree train,” she said.

She said they put the first tree close to the power source and then space them out from there.

“There is a certain spacing we try to maintain,” Sanburg said. “We try and put the trees between houses so that they can be viewed better from shore.”

The trees are then anchored and waterproof electrical cables are hooked up. Staff does any last-minute maintenance, such as replacing a bulb broken during transportation, and tests the lights in preparation for the big night.

The trees in Alamitos Bay get turned on tonight at approximately 5:30 p.m. and will be turned on every night for the rest of the year. The Colorado Lagoon trees will be turned on Friday night in a special ceremony beginning at 7 p.m.