

# PRESS RELEASE



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## 2020 ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

ROANOKE COUNTY | Illuminights | [Read Submission](#)

In November 2019, Roanoke County's Explore Park launched the region's largest holiday event, an immersive outdoor walking lights tour. Illuminights was the culmination of three years of planning efforts by the County and local non-profit Center in the Square. Featuring over 500,000 lights, this new annual tradition exceeded attendance expectations with over 43,000 admissions. The event brought together various community partners, business sponsors and media sponsors to result in **Explore Park's** biggest month of attendance in history, while raising over \$450,000 in net revenue to be shared between the sponsor organizations.

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VACo exists to support county officials and to effectively represent, promote and protect the interests of counties to better serve the people of Virginia.

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## **Brief Overview**

In November 2019, Roanoke County's Explore Park launched the region's largest holiday event, an immersive outdoor walking lights tour. Illuminights was the culmination of three years of planning efforts by the County and local non-profit Center in the Square. Featuring over 500,000 lights, this new annual tradition exceeded attendance expectations with over 43,000 admissions. The event brought together various community partners, business sponsors and media sponsors to result in Explore Park's biggest month of attendance in history, while raising over \$450,000 in net revenue to be shared between the sponsor organizations.

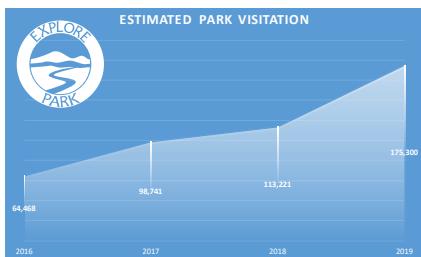
## **Executive Summary**

- **About the Park:** Roanoke County took over operation of Explore Park in 2014, with the goals of developing an outdoor adventure attraction and regional economic development. A master plan was developed with extensive public input to guide future park growth.
- **The Problem:** The park was mandated to recover operating costs from user fees, and needed to create off-peak season demand to support public-private partners.
- **Unique Collaboration:** Roanoke County partnered with Center in the Square (a local non-profit hosting cultural attractions) to create a unique fundraising event benefiting both organizations.
- **Trial Balloon - Holiday Village:** The two organizations executed a small-scale version of the event in 2018 to gage public interest and develop a work plan based on real data.
- **Fundraising Efforts:** Working with our non-profit partners, staff developed sales materials to pitch sponsorships to corporate donors. These efforts raised \$300,000 within six months to be used for event infrastructure.
- **Press Announcement:** At a "Christmas in July" event on July 25, 2019, Roanoke County announced dates and plans for Illuminights, generating a high level of public interest.
- **Building a Custom Trail:** Prior to the event, Roanoke County constructed a 6-foot wide, accessible trail at the park which could be used for the event, and fulfilled the recreational needs outlined in the park's master plan.
- **Volunteers:** Community enthusiasm for Illuminights led to 1,362 volunteers hours, enabling efficient and cost effective operations throughout the 26-day event.
- **Calendar / Special Activities:** While the light show was the main attraction, other free activities were set up on select nights at the park to drive traffic to low volume nights or spread out visitors on high volume nights.
- **Media & Social Media Success:** Through media partnerships and strategic social media marketing efforts, Roanoke County spread the word about Illuminights with no financial investment in marketing.
- **Results / Model for Other Governments:** Illuminights exceeded all expectations with 43,000 admissions and a net revenue of over \$450,000. The event serves as a model for other governments through innovative use of partnerships and fundraising, as well as citizen responsive planning and execution.
- **Supplemental Information:** An appendix is included with financial information and additional event pictures.

## About Explore Park

Roanoke County took over management of Explore Park in 2014 through a 100-year lease with the Virginia Recreational Facilities Authority. Located directly on the Blue Ridge Parkway, the 1,100 acre park formerly operated as a living history attraction, but closed in 2007 due to lack of state funding. After a master plan process and extensive community input, Roanoke County's department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism set out to re-purpose the facility as an outdoor adventure tourism destination.

Under the County's leadership Explore Park has been brought back to life through a series of public-private partnerships. Primitive camping, cabins, yurts and RV spaces were brought online from 2017 to 2018 with the help of two private vendors. In 2019 a historic restaurant on the property was re-opened as a brewpub through a partnership with Twin Creeks Brewing Company. Also last season, an aerial adventure course with ziplines opened up at the park, operated by the County through a franchise agreement.



Over the last three seasons, Explore Park has seen record attendance with an estimated 175,000 visitors. Through community buy-in, these efforts have turned around a negative perception of the park and enhanced the facility's regional reputation.

## The Problem

Explore Park was established with a mandate from the Board of Supervisors to recover all operating costs with user fees. The park was given an initial capital investment for infrastructure such as roads and building repairs, with the goal of creating economic development opportunities. However, annual capital operating budgets rely 100% on revenue from a Visitor Center gift shop and the Treetop Quest aerial adventure course. To continue development and guarantee ongoing maintenance of the park, Roanoke County faces two major challenges:

- 1) Developing unique sources of operating capital through user fees
- 2) Creating off-season demand through the addition new experiences.

## Unique Collaboration

In 2017, Roanoke County officials were approached by Center in the Square (a non-profit hosting cultural attractions and museums) with the idea to create a unique fundraising event in our area. A monthly work group was formed to explore the idea of a large scale holiday light show that could serve as a fundraiser for both organizations. The original concept was to establish a driving lights show, but Explore Park's terrain and infrastructure were better suited to a walking tour. In June 2018, Roanoke County and Center in the Square entered a memorandum of understanding to jointly operate a walking holiday lights tour for the next five years. The non-profit's fundraising structure already in place would raise money for the lights and initial startup costs through corporate donations. Roanoke County's experienced special event staff and recreation professionals would take the lead in running the event. Revenue would be split 50/50 between the two organizations.



- **Benefits for Roanoke County** - Explore Park would have a new signature event to help increase visitor traffic during the off-peak winter season, while creating a new revenue source to support general operations.
- **Benefits for Center in the Square** - The non-profit lacked the manpower to create an event of this magnitude on its own. This event would become not only a fundraiser to support the cultural amenities they provide, but would associate them with a popular and growing area attraction.

## Trail Balloon - Holiday Village

With only a few months left in 2018, the event committee realized there was not enough time to launch a full-scale light show by the end of the year. Instead, they staged a free eight-day preview event called "Holiday Village," which consisted of a small initial light investment, artisan crafts, food and limited entertainment. While two of the planned days were rain-outs, the six operating nights saw over 8,000 visitors, shattering the expected event attendance.

Holiday Village was beneficial in the following ways:

- Public Interest - We were able to determine sufficient public interest in the event to seek the capital investments necessary.
- Marketing Materials - Photo and video elements were captured during this event to aid in a large scale marketing effort the following year.
- Event logistics - This event helped us develop crowd management and staffing structures that would be needed in a larger event the following year.
- Fundraising Help - The event's success gave a tremendous boost to initial fundraising efforts going into 2019.

## Fundraising Efforts

Work began immediately on the full 26-day event to be held between November 29, 2019 and January 1, 2020. Roanoke County staff developed a new logo and title for the event, "Illuminights, Explore Park's Winter Walk of Lights."

- **Video Brochure** - Using video elements from the preview event, staff created an innovative video sales brochure as a leave behind for potential sponsors. Editing and stakeholder interviews were done completely in-house. The polished leave-behind piece consisted of three videos, highlighting general information about the event, Explore Park and sponsorship opportunities. A corporate sponsor paid \$8,000 in production costs for the marketing piece, in exchange for having their logo on the back of the brochure.
- **Major Corporate Sponsors** - A sponsorship packet was developed including various donor levels and benefits specified over a three-year contribution period. Center in the Square's experienced fundraising staff tackled presentations to local corporate sponsors. Within six-months the team secured the \$300,000 required to purchase lights and infrastructure.
- **Media Sponsorship** - Through a request for proposal process, the event committee selected WSL5-TV as the official media sponsor. The NBC affiliate pledged over \$50,000 in in-kind advertising including television ads, web ads, weather sponsorships and packaged news content. Smaller media sponsors included The Roanoke Times and City Magazine.

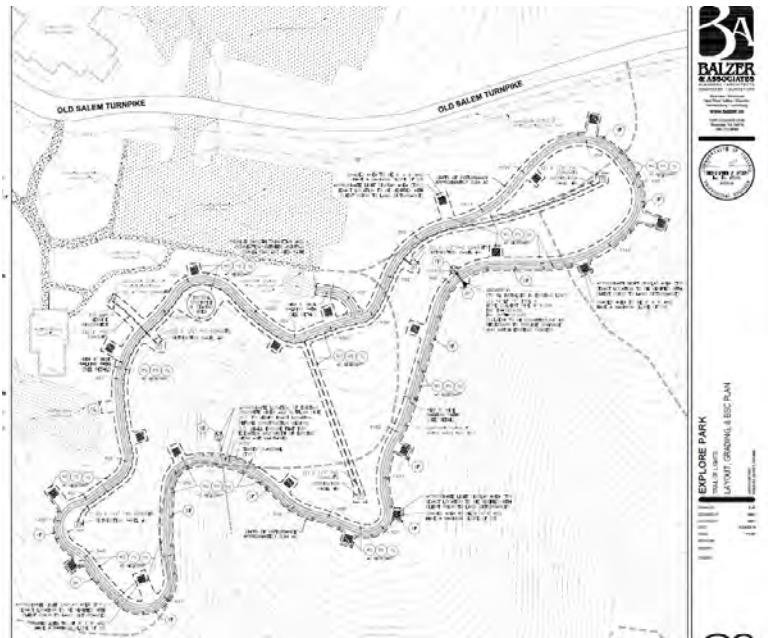


## Press Announcement

A joint press conference was held on July 25, 2019 to coincide with "Christmas in July," announcing the name and dates for the upcoming event to the media. It was attended by all three of the region's major television news operations as well as several print media representatives. This event was held inside Center in the Square, allowing us to recognize sponsors already signed up to contribute, and show off several illuminated displays that would be featured at Illuminights. The announcement also marked the beginning of a campaign to work with local elementary school art programs to display holiday crafts at the event.

## Building a Custom Trail

One of the amenities called for in the Explore Park master plan was an accessible walking loop. Prior to 2019, the only trails at the park were hilly dirt paths and single track bike trails. Roanoke County administrators decided to use some of the park's infrastructure funding for the construction of a 3/4 mile loop that could be dedicated to Illuminights in November & December, but also serve as a much needed nature trail the rest of the year.



The trail was constructed over six weeks from September to October. It is a 6-foot wide packed, stone dust surface trail with grades of 8% or less throughout, able to accommodate wheelchairs or individuals with limited mobility. Construction included the electrical infrastructure to handle the event, such as six new panel boxes. The trail was completed on schedule at the cost of \$169,502.42.

## Event Planning / Layout

The light show experience consisted of an estimated 500,000 lights, with large metal displays, wrapped trees, LED tunnels, and an interactive orb garden. Our event committee divided the trail into four themed areas; Christmas Traditions, Nature, Fantasy and Adventure.

County staff worked closely with product supplier MOSCA design, as well as several other vendors to match the themes

and create a unique light show experience unlike any other in our region. A parks staff member was dedicated nearly full time to the project from September through January to organize and orchestrate bringing the display online.

Additional parks staff members were added as the event drew closer, with a team of up to six staff working setup and construction every day by early November. Total light setup took approximately 1,750 staff hours.

## Volunteers

Operating a 26-night event is also a labor intensive endeavor. Fortunately, due to an outpouring of public support there was no shortage of volunteers. In total there were 227 volunteer shifts, each between 6 and 8 hours in length. In total, volunteers contributed 1,362 hours. Volunteers ranged from individuals to civic groups and local businesses. They performed tasks such as customer service, youth crafts, marshmallow roasting, trash pickup and parking management.

## Calendar / Special Activities

Illuminights admission was priced at \$6 for ages 2-14 and \$13 for ages 15 and up when tickets are purchased online. An additional \$4 fee was added at the gate to discourage walk-ups and allow for better traffic forecasting.

While the light show was the main attraction, other free activities were set up on select nights at the park to drive traffic to low volume nights or spread out visitors on high volume nights. These included:

- Artisan Christmas Market – Over 50 local artisans featured with Christmas crafts and wares
- Children’s Santa Shop – Kids were able to enter Santa’s workshop to shop for gifts on their own for family and friends.
- Santa Visits – Santa was on-site from the North Pole telling stories and taking photos with children.
- Edible Art – Children were able to decorate holiday cookies on each Sunday and Thursday.
- Carriage Rides – \$10 per person for Wagon Style, \$15 per person for Covered Carriage. Each Thursday and New Year’s Eve.
- Marshmallow Roasting – Available every night except when Carriage Rides were running.
- Food Vendors & Concessions – General concessions items were available including hot cocoa, cider, stew and hot dogs. A kettle corn vendor was on location each night, and local food trucks were on-site on select nights. Twin Creeks Brewpub celebrated a grand opening during the event, serving craft beer, ciders and limited food menu.

DECEMBER 2019						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
					NOVEMBER 29	NOVEMBER 30
1	2 NO EVENT	3 NO EVENT	4 NO EVENT	5 Gingerbread Man	6	7
8	9 NO EVENT	10 NO EVENT	11 NO EVENT	12 Santa	13	14
15	16 MILITARY NIGHT	17	18	19 Santa	20	21
22	23 FIRST RESPONDER NIGHT	24	25 NO EVENT	26 Santa	27	28
29	30 HUMAN SERVICES NIGHT	31	JANUARY 1 Santa			

Regular operating night (Illuminights trail only - no extra activities)
Children’s Santa shop open (no adults allowed) In addition to Illuminights trail
Group night: 10% off for bookings of 10 or more for Illuminights trail
Appreciation night: 20% off Illuminights trail (see admission tab)

- Shuttles – In order to accommodate high demand in ticket sales and limited parking on December 14th and 20th through 23rd, public shuttle transportation was available for visitors to park at Carillion Clinic's Riverside Parking Garage. Guests who took 15-minute ride to the park received a \$4 off discount admission at the gate, making tickets equal value to the advance registration rate.
- Appreciation Nights (Mondays) – 20% discounts were given for the following groups: Military Night, First Responder Night and Human Services Night.



## Media & Social Media Success

Our event team originally planned to invest \$20,000 in marketing for the event, but ultimately no funding was needed at all. While our major television media partner provided a huge boost in attendance, Illuminights received an incredible amount of organic promotion.

- Earned Media - More than 20 media stories and features covered the event, representing all local television, print and radio outlets. Additionally four Roanoke Times feature stories captured the imagination of perspective guests.

- Social Media - The organic facebook posting for this event reached an amazing 192,700 visitors. Additionally, designed photo ops and light displays resulted in many organic shares, tags and free publicity.



## Results / Model for Other Governments

In our final analysis, Illuminights far exceeded all expectations. Total paid admissions for the event were 43,097, consisting of 30,676 advance tickets and 12,421 gate tickets. Net revenue from the event was \$449,000, allowing both Roanoke County and Center in the Square to receive \$224,000 in proceeds. The final figure accounts for event costs, setup costs, police security, part time staff and miscellaneous supplies.

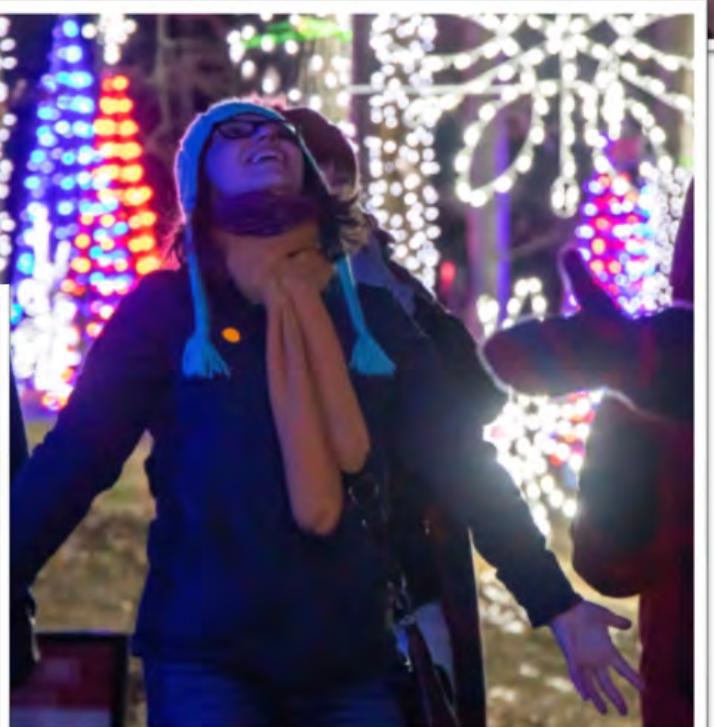
Positive community feedback was overwhelming, as Roanoke County received countless of comments of praise on social media. Within the past few months, Illuminights was named the "Best Thing to Happen in Roanoke in 2019" by a Roanoker Magazine readers poll.

Here are a few key ways that Illuminights can be a model for other governments.



- **Partnerships Generating Goodwill** - By partnering with a beloved local non-profit, Roanoke County received more than just revenue from the event. Participants had a memorable family experience while giving to a positive cause, knowing their financial contribution would be used to perpetuate cultural amenities in the community.
- **Innovative Fundraising** - Utilizing a non-profit's fundraising ability paid off in multiple ways. Their existing sponsorship donor base was able to contribute in a new way, while receiving unique event recognition. Sponsor investments went straight into light display purchase, allowing both organizations to keep more of the ticket revenue. Finally, our non-profit partner was able to purchase the displays and infrastructure outside of the County's procurement process. This resulted in more flexibility for our creative team.

- **Responsive Planning & Development** - Every step of the event planning process involved the consideration of citizen feedback. Our custom-build accessible trail came directly from the community driven master plan for Explore Park. It has become a permanent year-round amenity to serve the public when not in use for Illuminights. Our Holiday Village trial event also helped event planners gain valuable community feedback prior to making a large investment in staff time in planning and execution.



## Supplemental Photos



## Media Promotion & Features

These images represent a few of the over 20 media features covering Illuminights.



Families enjoy final night at Illuminights holiday light display



Future bright for IllumiNights in Explore Park



BEST OF ROANOKE  
where to go and  
what to do

### Best Thing To Happen In Roanoke, 2019

PLATINUM Illuminights at Explore Park

GOLD Badass Lady Gang

SILVER Carilion Clinic Expansion



#### Lighting the Way

How Roanoke's first-ever Illuminights became a clear event fan favorite – and a new holiday tradition.

Illuminights was a clear winner for our region this year! As the Platinum winner for "Best Thing to Happen in Roanoke, 2019" and Gold winner for "Best Annual Holiday Event" as voted on by readers in our Best of Roanoke 2020 poll, Illuminights highlighted the beauty of Explore Park during the winter season.

Roanoke County Parks, Recreation and Tourism's Special Events and Tourism Coordinator Wendi Schultz says they wanted to bring a signature holiday event to the Valley that showcased the unique partnership between Roanoke County and Center in the Square.

"Rarely can you find two organizations who work so well together and whose mission so complement each other," Schultz says.

Illuminights was a whole-hearted endeavor to raise \$75,000 to set the lights and displays on the trail, along with 22 different staff and over 500 volunteers to operate the actual event.

And it was just the thing to get everyone in the holiday spirit. With over 200,000 lights, attendees could journey at their own pace on a walking tour of displays celebrating nature, fantasy, adventure and, of course, Christmas traditions. The

half-mile wooded path allowed everyone to take in the sights and sounds of the season. Guests could also enjoy interactive fun such as cookie decorating, marshmallow roasting and even carriage rides. In addition to Ti Creaks Brewpub, you could also enjoy hot cocoa and cider and various food trucks.

In fact, it became such popular holiday fun that the crowds were encouraged to buy tickets in advance so not to miss out on the fun.

are thrilled that the community has so enthusiastically embraced this event," says Schultz. "And we love that they will be making it a part of their annual Christmas tradition with family and friends!"

Schultz says Illuminights was exciting not only because it was new to the area, but because it was "very different from anything else that has happened to this community during the holiday season." Affordability was another factor, as was the feel-good factor that simply bringing families and friends together in a festive and joyful environment.

"I loved seeing the smiles on everyone's faces," Schultz says, adding "and the gleam of wonder in their eyes as they experienced our Walk of Lights!"

Illuminights will return in 2020 with new sights and sounds, and plenty of smiles on everyone's faces. Don't miss a single festive second – stay updated with Explore Park and Center in the Square's Illuminights at [roanokecountyparks.com/545/Illuminights](http://roanokecountyparks.com/545/Illuminights).

-Liz Long

TheRoanoke.com

# THE ROANOKE TIMES

THE ROANOKE TIMES News Obituaries Sports eTimes Buy & Sell SEARCH

Merry and bright IllumiNights fills Explore Park with holiday lights

By Lisa Johnson | photo by Michael Hickey | Dec 11, 2019



THE ROANOKE TIMES News Obituaries Sports eTimes Buy & Sell SEARCH

Future bright for IllumiNights in Explore Park

By Lisa Johnson | photo by Michael Hickey | Dec 12, 2019



## Financial Documentation



**County of Roanoke**  
**Revenue & Expenditures Budget to Actual**  
**4/28/2020**  
**C58-C150-5805-127-C151 - Christmas Lights**

Account	Description	Actual	Parks-Labor	Outstanding	Final
			Set Up	Take Down	
<b>Revenues</b>					
016501	Food Sales	18,071.98		0.00	18,071.98
016513	Ticket Sales	531,055.92	23,836.89	0.00	554,892.81
016515	Merchandise Sales	5,581.53		0.00	5,581.53
	<b>Total Revenue</b>	<b>554,709.43</b>	<b>23,836.89</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>578,546.32</b>
<b>Expenditures</b>					
101015	Overtime	10,076.00		0.00	10,076.00
101020	Part-Time	47,196.84		0.00	47,196.84
101086	PT - Law Enforcement Personnel	7,573.05		0.00	7,573.05
202100	FICA - Employer Contribution	4,884.11		0.00	4,884.11
202200	Retirement - VRS	14.78		0.00	14.78
202300	Group Health Insurance	95.80		0.00	95.80
202400	Life Insurance - VRS	1.57		0.00	1.57
202500	Long Term Disability Insurance	0.63		0.00	0.63
202750	VRS Retiree Health Credit	0.36		0.00	0.36
300007	Contractual Services	16,534.37		0.00	16,534.37
601013	Supplies and Small Equipment	22,436.36		0.00	22,436.36
640003	Merchandise for Resale	16,032.36		0.00	16,032.36
	WorldPay Credit Card Usage	3,915.60		0.00	3,915.60
	Utilities	634.64		0.00	634.64
	<b>Total Expenditures</b>	<b>129,396.47</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>129,396.47</b>
	<b>Net Revenue/Expenditures</b>	<b>425,312.96</b>	<b>23,836.89</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>449,149.85</b>

Set up/TakeDown	Adjusted Parks labor overtime	3,998.33	3,998.33
Set up/TakeDown	Adjusted Park labor Part-time	19,838.56	19,838.56
Reimbursement	Center in The Square	23,836.89	23,836.89

Actual Parks Labor		
Expenses for Set up/Take down		
Labor-Full time-Park-time and Overtime	52,275.17	
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>52,275.17</b>	

Illuminights Revenue Summary	\$449,149.85
Center in The Square	50% \$224,574.93
RC Parks Recreation and Tourism	50% \$224,574.93
	<b>\$449,149.85</b>