

## **Voice Column for November 2019**

### **Stroll on State a true community effort**

Business, Volunteer, visitor numbers continue to grow

*By John Groh*

You need more than a calculator to measure the benefits of Stroll on State, the one-day, downtown celebration that kicks off our holiday season the Saturday after Thanksgiving.

A calculator helps. It counts the number of people who bundle up and spend the day at Stroll, taking in the parade and entertainment, sipping hot chocolate, sampling tasty local food, and exploring the unique offerings of downtown retailers. Last year, our sixth Stroll, the calculator clicked 87,500 times while tracking the number of people who “Strolled.” That’s three times the number who came when Stroll premiered in 2013.

A calculator can also tell us how many people value Stroll enough to pitch in and make it happen. We can’t overlook the thousands of volunteers who devoted their time to help transform downtown into a mini North Pole, complete with so many bright and shining lights. Or the good folks at Illinois Bank & Trust who are again Stroll’s presenting sponsor.

Of course, calculators are important to people like Jarrod Hennis of Rockford Art Deli and Charlie Schweinler from Lino’s. They use them constantly to help keep their small local businesses in the black. Rockford Art Deli will have the store’s holiday T-shirts and gift items out as a full crew handles constant traffic on the Art Deli’s biggest sales day of the year. Schweinler and his team at Lino’s Restaurant, though they’re several miles from the downtown Stroll hubbub, will be ready for a mid- to late-night jump in customers as Strollers look for a quiet and warm place to unwind and dine after their Stroll excitement.

For each of the local businesses, but especially downtown merchants, Stroll happens to fall on Small Business Saturday and is a perfect opportunity to meet hundreds of potential customers who are visiting their establishment, some for the first time. Many remember the friendliness and quality, and plan a return trip. The calculator looks forward to chocking up those sales, perhaps on warmer days.

This year’s Stroll will include entertainers new to Rockford, a parade full of surprises, the popular Dasher Dance 5k run (presented by SwedishAmerican), and of course, the lighting of the Christmas tree. That’s the crowning moment for Stroll, when we flip the switch and over thirteen thousand hung lights shine on Stroll and Rockford before fireworks go off in the background. That’s when the real impact of Stroll on State can be seen, in exclamations of joy and memories our trusty calculator can’t calculate.

We believe it is one of Rockford's finest moments. As Schweinler says, "we need a place the community can come together in a family-focused, positive environment. Stroll on State has become a great tradition in Rockford and the region."

Even our calculator shuts off when we step back to take in the pure wonder of Christmas, and the feeling you get when sharing that with friends, neighbors and community. We hope you and your family will make Stroll of State part of your holiday experience this year, on Saturday November 30.