

Want fireworks? Pass the hat.

MANY CITIES TURN TO DONORS TO FUND JULY 4 CELEBRATIONS.

By Kay Nolan / Contributor

When Jim Davis was growing up in blue-collar Austintown, Ohio, in the 1980s, Fourth of July fireworks were the highlight of the year. The best place to view the display was on a dead-end road near his home. He and his friends would tie aluminum cans to parked cars while the owners were watching the display, then delight in the noisy ruckus when the spectators drove away.

"It became a local tradition," says Mr. Davis, who is now a town trustee. "We started saving soda pop cans and beer cans all year long."

But Austintown hasn't had July 4 fireworks for seven years because of a rotten economy and the downsizing of the high school athletic field, where the event was held. This year, Davis is determined to bring them

back, seeking sponsors and donors to pay for the event.

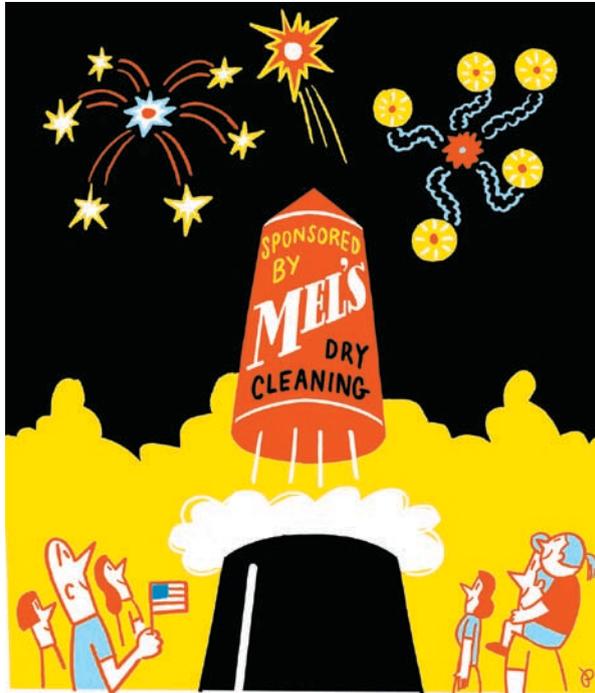
It's a trend that's taken hold coast to coast as communities look to fund July 4 fireworks that taxpayers want, but can no longer afford.

For the second year in a row, Oakbrook Terrace, Ill., in Chicago's western suburbs, is going the donor route. The city's website spells out naming rights for various levels of donations and also describes the perks doled out in return, including plaques, free picnic tickets, and donors' names published on banners and in local media.

"We've had a lot of things taken away, but we are known for our fireworks and it's something our residents really enjoy," says Lori Dvorak, the city's special events coordinator. "We can't even fit all the people in our park that come for our fireworks."

Even wealthy communities have turned to fundraising to retain Independence Day fireworks.

"A lot of folks assume the city pays for it, and it doesn't," says Keith Turner of the nonprofit Palisades Americanism Parade Association, which for the past several years has raised funds for fireworks in Pacific Palisades, Calif. (median household income: \$158,381). With



California's finances in dire straits, he adds, some Los Angeles communities have dropped Fourth of July fireworks, prompting residents to flock to Pacific Palisades to mingle with wealthy doctors, lawyers, and movie stars who – like many Americans – trek to the local high school stadium to watch the fireworks display.

The number of Fourth of July fireworks displays nationally has held fairly steady at 14,000, says Julie Heckman, executive director of the American Pyrotechnics Association in Bethesda, Md.

"What we've seen in this tough economy is a shift in who's paying for fireworks. Instead of your typical municipal budget funding the community show, we're seeing private sponsorship and donations."

Fireworks manufacturers do their best to fit shrinking budgets, making adjustments that the general public won't notice, she adds. A small community might spend \$10,000 for a fireworks show; major cities, \$50,000 and up.

Regardless of expense, Fourth of July fireworks tend to last 20 to 30 minutes, says John Werner, president of the National Fireworks Association in Kansas City, Mo. Communities have to wait until 9:30 p.m., when it gets dark. By 10, children are ready to go home. Besides,

"after a half-hour, you tend to repeat yourself," he adds.

Communities struggling to fund fireworks might take a lesson from the Central Pennsylvania 4thFest, which draws as many as 80,000 people to the Penn State campus for daylong festivities culminating in spectacular fireworks.

Now in its 12th year, the event has become a well-oiled machine, drawing on the talents of 540 volunteers and collecting an estimated quarter-million dollars in cash and in-kind support.

"The secret is volunteer power," says 4thFest's executive director, Bernie Keisling. Volunteers even get trained and licensed to set off the fireworks themselves, eliminating the need to hire professionals.

Volunteerism has spread in the area. Local restaurants

offer free meals to the pyrotechnic volunteers. A security company provides fencing free of charge around the fireworks launching site. Fire departments in the vicinity offer standby emergency services for no charge, in exchange for VIP viewing passes for their families.

"They love to gear up and bring their fire engines," says Mr. Keisling. Corporate and individual donations pay for expenses like insurance and the services of the Penn State Police.

The volunteer spirit doesn't surprise Chauncey Niziol, who lives in Westchester, Ill., and watches Oakbrook's fireworks. "It's got that boom that everybody wants, the colors," he says. "You never know what's going to pop in the sky."

Back in Austintown, Davis created a Facebook page to gather support for reviving the fireworks, and raised \$21,000 – enough to book two live bands for the evening of July 3. The page announces: "And then just you wait, at 10 o'clock, the sky will be the dance floor as the fireworks dance to music."

To be certain that all the townspeople got the good news, Davis also sent out a mass e-mail. He says, "I got several quick replies back that said, 'Start saving your pop cans!'" ■