

## **The plight of the lights in Ladera Ranch**

**County says a neighborhood's decorations on public property must come down unless residents seek and pay for a permit.**

**BY TOMOYA SHIMURA/ STAFF WRITER**

Every year after Thanksgiving, residents on Baudin Circle host a party and decorate the whole neighborhood to show their holiday spirit, hanging lights between houses across the street and on trees and light poles.

It brings the neighbors on the cul-de-sac together as they compete against other streets in the homeowners association's holiday decorating contest.

This year, however, they head into Christmas with bitter feelings.

Baudin residents received warning letters last week from the county telling them that they are encroaching on public streets, sidewalks and property. The county gave them the option to either take infringing lights down by today or get an encroachment permit – which costs \$583 per project for administration costs as well as a \$1,000 surety fee and proof of a \$1 million liability insurance policy.

If the residents don't comply, they could face misdemeanor charges or be cited for infractions with fines of up to \$500 a day.

"It's stupid," Maranda MacDonald, 17, said. "We've been doing this forever. We're not hurting anybody. It's a Christmas spirit."

A neighborhood in Trabuco Canyon garnered attention last year after residents fought to keep cross-street holiday lights in place. The county gave them an exception, waiving fees and expediting the permit process so that residents could keep lights up.

In anticipation of the same issue reoccurring this holiday, the county recommended streamlining the process and subsidizing fees for the applicants. That would cost the county estimated \$101,500 a year. The proposal didn't get enough support from the Board of Supervisors and died.

"We want residents to enjoy the holiday season with lighting and displays," said Shannon Widor, spokesman for OC Public Works. "We just want to encourage residents to take the proper path to ensure safety, and that includes obtaining a permit."

The county needs to ensure cross-street lighting allows emergency vehicles such as firetrucks to drive through streets safely, Widor said. Extension cables crossing the streets and sidewalks on the ground on Baudin are also in violation, he said.

"That's obviously a safety concern we're worried about, whether vehicles driving over it or children tripping on those cords," Widor said.

Displays contained on private property don't need permits.

To reduce the financial burden on individual homeowners, the county offers an option for HOAs to apply for one permit that covers all interested homeowners.

A Trabuco Canyon HOA in November obtained a permit for 62 homes. The county hasn't received applications from Ladera Ranch residents or HOAs, Widor said.

OC Public Works this year has issued 21 correction notices for holiday decorations in three Ladera Ranch neighborhoods, including Baudin, De Leon Lane and Bainbridge Avenue, Widor said.

Widor said the county has been enforcing holiday lighting regulations but doesn't have resources for an enforcement crew to drive around looking for encroachment. The violations were found through anonymous complaints from residents, he said. It's likely that the county, until this year, hadn't received complaints about the Baudin neighborhood.

"It tends to be a challenge that every single homeowner is aware of various issues, not just permit issues," Widor said. "We are trying to do all we can to make sure residents are up to speed."

Baudin residents said they didn't know about the permit process until they received the correction notices. Some said they would take the infringing lights down to avoid penalties, while others said they would keep the lights up since the holiday season is almost over.

"I understand the county's concerns, but the neighborhood has been doing this since we've been here, doing the same thing," said Chris Mellow, who's lived on Baudin for six years.

Mellow and his neighbors said their neighborhood cannot afford the permit fees on their own.

"The street would be a lot darker and less festive" next year, Mellow said.

#### **HOW TO APPLY FOR A PERMIT**

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To obtain an encroachment permit in unincorporated communities, contact OC Public Works at [714-667-8888](tel:714-667-8888) or [ocplanning.net/permits](http://ocplanning.net/permits).