

Fire safety comes before fun at Festival of Trees and Lights

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Feathers. Cross them off the list of decorations to go on the Christmas tree. No matter how “in” they are this year, they combust rapidly.

This was evident Wednesday as Eric Guevin set fire to decorations from trees assembled at MontBleu for the Festival of Trees and Lights that starts today.



A marshmallow becomes toasty on a school tree and needs treating to remain.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

Guevin is the acting fire marshal for Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District. It's his job to make sure this event with its 14 designer trees and assorted holiday decorations don't go up in flames if they were to catch fire.

Snipping pieces of fabric he assembles a handful to take to

the back loading dock to set on fire.

A feather becomes unrecognizable charred debris in seconds.

“Maybe you should tell them no feathers,” Guevin says to Denise Earls with Barton Foundation and Anna Vopalensky with MontBleu.

Earls says they’ll try treating it one more time with a fire retardant spray. If it burns again, that tree won’t be lighted.

Last year two trees didn’t pass muster and therefore could not have the lights on.

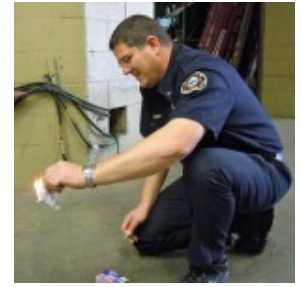
“Someone flocked their own tree last year. It was scary when he tested it,” Earls said.

Barton Foundation, sponsors of the event, order the trees so they come treated. They can even get flocked trees that are flame resistant. It’s the stuff people use themselves that can spark to make it be like a Fourth of July celebration.

Guevin says many of the things he inspects for in a commercial setting apply to homes. Artificial trees need to be fire resistant. Fresh trees need to have water – and the needles should be hard to pull from the branches.

A non-grounded extension cord is a no-no and not allowed to be used at the festival. Guevin advises following the same policy at home.

One tree is being backlighted with a floodlight. Guevin shakes his head. Vopalensky finds a casino employee to replace it with something they have that won’t set the place on fire.



Eric Guevin with Tahoe Douglas fire watches material go up in flames.

“This could be a good ignition source,” Guevin says of the light. It’s almost like a heat lamp.

At home, lights on trees should not have damaged strands, no more than three strands per extension cord, and all lights should be off and/or unplugged when going to bed or leaving the house.

To pass the fire marshal’s test the item cannot burn for more than 12 seconds, will extinguish itself, and if it drips, the matter goes out and does not continue to burn.

“Some designers come to us ahead of time to be preapproved,” Guevin said. “We’ve done training for designers so they know what products are acceptable to use.”

Barton Foundation has two people patrolling the premise at all times who are called fire watchers – just in case.

Public viewing of the trees is \$5 for adults, \$3 for children and seniors. Both Raley’s in South Lake Tahoe have discounted tickets for \$3 for all ages. Those prices are good Dec. 2-4 from 10am-2pm. Special events associated with the Festival of Trees and Lights are throughout the three days, with

information online.