

Bah, humbug

Changes in holiday parade draw complaints

By SCOTT WILLIAMS
of the Journal Star

Organizers of this year's Santa Claus parade in Peoria are drawing such heavy criticism that they might as well be spreading rumors that Old Saint Nick doesn't really exist.

Officials at the Peoria Convention & Visitors Bureau have been planning all year for the Nov. 27 event — the 100th anniversary of what is the nation's oldest Santa Claus parade.

An invitation has been extended to President Ronald Reagan, and hopes are building that the event will generate some national publicity for this image-conscious city.

But several longtime participants in the annual downtown celebration are irritated by what they describe as a willingness to sacrifice old-fashioned fun for a chance to bolster Peoria's reputation.

Hopeful paraders describe an auditionlike screening of would-be participants, and many say parade organizers have directed them to upgrade the visual impact of their floats or face elimination.

In addition, there is strong resentment toward a first-ever fee for anyone entering a float — a \$50 fee that is not being applied universally.

Some groups cite the irony of this year's theme, "Christmas is for Chil-

dren," because, they say, the expense of joining the high-brow affair has forced some youthful participants to drop out.

Fran Kepler, spokeswoman for the local Girl Scouts organization, said her troops have participated in the parade for decades, but organizers this year were unreceptive until the Girl Scouts made some ornamental alterations.

"They said we didn't look Christmasy enough and could we look more Christmasy," Kepler said.

Parade organizers finally were satisfied, she said, when the Girl Scouts agreed to march in their uniforms and sing Christmas carols.

Unfortunately, Kepler said that will eliminate many girls who are in the organization but who cannot afford the official Girl Scout uniform.

"People want to take part in the holidays, and we're doing the best we can," she said. "It's been really different this year — and difficult."

The Peoria Dental Society Auxiliary had to provide organizers with a sketch of the group's float and costume ideas, as well as a detailed description of whatever activities the group planned to bring to the parade.

Group spokeswoman Diana Couri said she was not sure her organization would want to invest in the cost of joining, but

the event was seen as an irresistible public-relations opportunity for local dentists.

"If there are other groups who couldn't afford it," Couri said, "I would feel real bad about that, because Christmas is for children."

An angry local dance instructor said her students will miss the Santa Claus parade for the first time in five years because of the expense of joining this year's elaborate event.

Michelle Loeffler, owner of The Studio School of Dance and Baton Twirling, said her children, ages 3 to 14, had been practicing for weeks before learning that this year's parade was cost-prohibitive.

"I think it's rotten to disappoint all the children, when the parade is for the children," Loeffler said.

Organizers acknowledge that they are being more selective this year in choosing the estimated 100 floats, marching bands and other participants to parade through the streets of Peoria.

But they contend that their intention is not to preclude groups from participating — only to make the event more enjoyable by pumping a little extra pageantry into the show.

Chief organizer Carl Bunker said the \$50 entry fee for floats is needed to cover the estimated \$30,000 expense of the pa-

rade, including lining the streets with decorations and publishing a brochure for the historical event.

In fact, at least two participants have negotiated waivers of the controversial fee — the American Legion Color Guard and the Peoria Police Color Guard.

American Legion spokesman Don Ayers said he wrote to organizers and appealed for the waiver because his organization otherwise would have dropped out of the parade.

Bunker said exceptions on the entry fee are being made only when a group makes a case for the waiver and demonstrates that its participation in the parade will conform to the theme.

Other participants, however, were surprised to learn that the fee is not being charged across the board, saying they, too, had trouble coming up with the money.

Sandy DeSutter said her Cub Scout troop had to use money from its fundraisers.

And even though her troop of Cub Scouts won the float competition last year, DeSutter said organizers warned her that the show this time around had to be top notch.

Or as she put it, "They wanted to weed out 20 kids just getting together and saying, 'Hey, let's be in a parade.'"