



JOHN KOZIOL/CITIZEN

IN THE annual ritual symbolizing and celebrating the good will between the two communities, Dick Breton, left, who is the mayor of Christmas Village, presents the key to the village to Ward 5 City Councilor Bob Hamel, who on Thursday was acting as mayor of the City of Laconia. Dressed in a Christmas-themed Hawaiian shirt, Hamel was filling in for Mayor Mike Seymour who was unable to attend the festivities, which began with the formal opening of Christmas Village for the 36th year at the Laconia Community Center. Christmas Village is free and is open through Sunday.

Christmas Village opens with a flourish, runs through Dec. 4

By JOHN KOZIOL

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LACONIA — To the delight of children of all ages, Santa and Mrs. Claus officially took up residence Thursday at the Laconia Community Center, which for the 36th year in a row, has been transformed by hundreds of volunteers elves into Christmas Village.

Modeled on and inspired by a similar, earlier effort at the Tapply-Thompson Community Center in Bristol, Christmas Village is one of the Lakes Region's longest continually running holiday traditions, a fact

belied by the cross-generational turnout last night that saw grandparents and toddlers take in the full majesty of a touch of the North Pole right here in Laconia.

As much as it means to the many visitors — Chief Elf Twinkle estimated that the event attracts between 3,000 and 5,000 every year — Christmas Village also means a lot to the many volunteers who've made it possible, among them Bob Hamel, who along with Twinkle and Twinkle's brother, Tinsel, have been behind and in front of the scenes for thirty years plus six.

"I'm very thrilled to participate in Christmas Village," said Hamel, who since 2006 has represented Ward 5 on the Laconia City Council and who for much longer, has helped to build erect and then remove Christmas Village at the LCC. Additionally, Hamel takes photographs of visitors' visits with Santa which at \$3 apiece, are the only cost associated with coming to Christmas Village and which are optional.

On Thursday evening, just before the doors opened to the public at 6 p.m., Hamel, who was resplendent in a Christmas-themed Hawaiian shirt, re-

ceived the key to Christmas Village from its mayor, Dick Breton. Laconia Mayor Mike Seymour was unable to attend the ceremony, and Hamel, who is mayor pro tem, filled in for him.

Joining Hamel for the key ceremony were city councilors Ava Doyle, Henry Lipman, Brenda Baer and Armand Bolduc — whose nom de plume for the next three days is Tinsel while his brother Ernie goes by Twinkle — as well as Police Chief Chris Adams, City Manager Scott Myers and several

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other friends of Christmas Village.

Breton, who is in his sixth year as a Christmas Village volunteer, said he was honored to be the village's mayor, calling it "a labor of love" that Santa's elves have been laboring on for the past three weeks.

A native of Manchester, Breton and his wife Priscilla have lived in Laconia for 46 years; for 16 of those years through today, Dick Breton has been a member of the Laconia Water Commission, the body that oversees the Laconia Water Department. Breton in 2003 also served briefly as the Ward 3 city councilor, filling out the balance of the term of the late Fred Toll before announcing that he would not seek a full term and supporting Lipman for the post which Lipman has held ever since.

The Bretons work with Hamel taking photos at Christmas Village and they said they always bring their grandchildren, who like all the children in the Lakes Region, should not expect any lumps of coal in their stockings from Santa, said Twinkle.

Asked whether local children have been good or especially good this past year, Twinkle — who is rumored to be one of Santa's key operational as well as strategic-planning elves — immediately replied that it was the latter.

"Oh God, absolutely, espe-

cially good," said Twinkle, estimating that between 3,000 and 5,000 visitors will come to Christmas Village 2011 before it closes on Sunday afternoon when Santa, Mrs. Claus and all the elves head back to Santa's North Pole workshop to make the final push to Christmas.

In the meantime, however, there is Christmas Village which begins in the LCC basement where there are arts, crafts, games and prizes for everyone. From there, the visitors are led upstairs for a ride in Santa's sleigh, which, of course, is pulled by Rudolf the red-nosed reindeer and his colleagues.

The visitors then go past the "elf-in-the-box" and a ceramic "Christmas village within the village," to the Christmas Village Train Station where model railroads run on a snowy track. The train station is right next door to Santa's Workshop where every visitor will be able to make and take their own personalized Christmas ornament.

Stepping into the "outdoor café," visitors will enjoy complimentary cookies and lemonade before they head, one by one, up Santa's Way to an eventual face-to-face meeting with the Jolly Old Elf.

Christmas Village will be open this evening from 6 to 8 p.m. and on Dec. 3 and 4 from 2 to 5 p.m. On Saturday, Dec. 3, there will be a special showing for senior citizens only from 10 a.m. to noon while, during that same time on Sunday, Dec. 4, the village will be open exclusively to disabled persons.