



**GROUP RECOGNITION:** The Alexandria Festival of Lights committee will be honoured during the North Glengarry Township Awards Gala Thursday, Sept. 29. Pictured here, back row, L-R are Tom Gerlich, Jeff Poissant, Alain Belanger, Edward McDonald, Gary Thompson, Daniel Lalonde, and Paul Lalonde. In the front row are Tish Nicholson, Bonnie McDonald, Ginny Menard, Ron Aubin and Karen Gerlich. Missing from the photo is Lisa Boyer.

PHOTO COURTESY TISH NICHOLSON

## Festival of Lights committee lauded for volunteerism

SUBMITTED BY TISH NICHOLSON

The Alexandria Festival of Lights Committee is in its sixth year of showcasing the Festival Of Lights in Island Park.

The original idea came from a resident who had relocated to our area from southwestern Ontario, where he had co-chaired a Christmas lights festival called "The Holiday Fantasy of Lights."

Tom Gerlich and his wife Karen, who came on board with the original idea, are still part of the current day committee, which is made up of a 13 regular members. Each of those members takes on volunteer jobs and other volunteers assist in getting everything from lights rolled onto hydro spools for storage, to erecting Christmas trees, displays, and decorating the park. This committee works year-round, usually on Saturday mornings at the parking lot behind OK Tire.

In the fall they head over to Island Park, where the serious decorating of the buildings gets started, and by mid-November the trees and displays start to go up.

In 2006, with just a few weeks to get the festival in place, North Glengarry council approved the use of Island Park for the event for the first time.

Other sponsors such as Caisse populaire Desjardins, and the Alexandria & District Chamber of Commerce came on board.

Without that first support, the festival would never have broken ground.

Every year, their efforts have paid off to increase sponsorship and participation from the businesses and community.

Every year the committee puts proceeds from the Festival of Lights back into Island Park improvements to grow the festival.

Six years ago, the volunteers opened the first show with 11 exhibitors, and a backdrop of brightly lit trees.

By 2008 they had more than 57,000 lights in the park. By 2010, this had grown to more than 100,000 lights, 63 businesses who purchased sponsor trees and 53 exhibitors who erected displays for the public to tour.

In 2010, wagon rides in the park, and tours on select neighbouring streets outside the park were added.

This has been most popular and will continue to grow in 2011. The Home Lights Decorating Contest, which has taken place for the last two years, has also grown in the number of residents participating.

The North Glengarry Youth Centre creates a Santa's Village and a schedule of activities during the month of December as part of the Festival of Lights program.

There is a popular visit with Santa and picture taking night, in which area businesses contribute gifts for Santa to give to the children.

The 2011 committee, which is chaired by Bonnie McDonald, consists of Ron Aubin, Edward McDonald, Jeff Poissant, Alain Belanger, Gary Thompson, Daniel Lalonde, Paul Lalonde, Ginny Menard, Lisa Boyer, Tish Nicholson, and Tom and Karen Gerlich.

This committee received national recognition in the winter of 2010, when they competed in the Winterlights Competition, a program of the Communities in Bloom.

Alexandria took first place in the Visual Presentation category and was awarded recognition from the sponsor, CN Tower, and the Communities in Bloom judges, at the national awards ceremony in P.E.I. last March.

In the fall of 2010, they submitted a grant application to Celebrate Ontario, and were awarded \$19,400.00 from the Province of Ontario for this year's programming, which will open Nov. 26 and run nightly until Jan. 1, 2012.

The committee is already hard at work to expand the exhibits and programs for 2011.

North Glengarry acknowledges the hard work of the many volunteers who put this program together, and congratulates the Festival of Lights Committee for their continued volunteerism and pride in showcasing Alexandria.