

Chihuly show boosts Phipps' attendance

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By Mary Thomas, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

One-third of the way through its run, "Chihuly at Phipps: Gardens & Glass" is meeting attendance expectations and increasing membership at Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens.

The installation of large colorful glass sculpture throughout the Victorian conservatory by globally praised artist Dale Chihuly and his Washington-state team was predicted to draw crowds, based upon response to other Chihuly shows at major botanical gardens here and abroad.

"We're very pleased with the way things are going," says Michael Sexauer, Phipps director of marketing and communications. "We're on target for what we're projecting."

Attendance figures for January through July 23 were 154,437, compared with 99,355 during the same period last year. Even more telling are the numbers for May 10 through July 23. The Chihuly show opened May 10, after the annual Spring Flower Show had ended. Attendance for that period was 86,036 this year compared with 25,244 in 2006.

Visitors from 45 states have reserved tickets online, Sexauer says. Natives of Canada and countries in Europe, the Middle East and Far East also have attended, though data on where they traveled from was not available.

As of the end of June, 19 percent of visitors came from outside the Pittsburgh metro area. Notables include several East Coast members of the Phipps family, Mayor Luke Ravenstahl and, on Monday, Judge Marjorie O. Rendell, first lady of Pennsylvania.

Phipps is selling advance-purchase, timed tickets for the show, a first for them. Sexauer says that this has resulted in visitors having "a very manageable, comfortable experience." He explains that Phipps wanted to avoid the "elbow to elbow" lines that sometimes occur during holiday flower shows.

As one might expect, weekend attendance is heaviest, with Sunday afternoons most in demand, although it's been rare that all tickets in all time slots have sold out. The Wednesday through Friday "Chihuly Nights" -- when the show is dramatically lit and requiring separate tickets -- are generally popular, and Fridays have been selling out regularly, Sexauer says.

Monday through Wednesday mornings, from the 9:30 opening slot until before 1 p.m., is when you're likely to encounter fewer people. "It's a little bit cooler, everything's very fresh, the crowds are a little lighter," Sexauer says.

Membership had increased by 20 percent by the end of June. "Chihuly is drawing a new audience," he says.

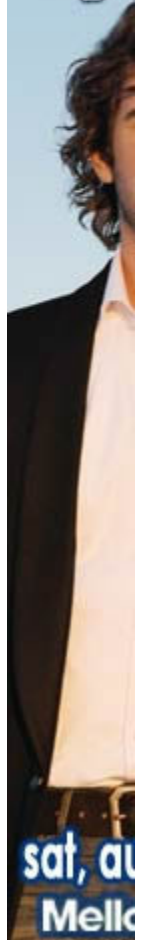
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Evidence for return visits is anecdotal, but Sexauer says comments such as "I've seen it twice" or "I had to come see it at night" are common.

Sales are up in the Phipps gift shop, and sales in a special Chihuly gift area are exceeding expectations. More than 20 pieces of original glass sculpture have been sold and about 10 Chihuly lithographs. And they've been selling out of, and having to reorder, items like books, DVDs, note cards and T-shirts.

Since Cafe Phipps is managed by big Burrito, Sexauer had no sales figures, but tables indoors and out have been filled.

"Attendance has helped everybody."

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