Vernon Hills light show continues, for now

By Rick Kambic
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VERNON HILLS — The popular Winter Wonderland drive-through light show begins Friday, Nov. 23, but its future remains uncertain.

Village officials are currently negotiating a new contract to continue using the historic Cuneo Mansion and Garden as the site of Winter Wonderland. The two sides, however, differ on a contract length.

Shortly after the Cuneo Mansion was donated to Loyola University Chicago in 2009, the school decided it was open to selling some of the surrounding 100 acres for redevelopment.

One prospective buyer surfaced earlier this year but has since backed out, according to Vernon Hills Village Manager Mike Allison.

How the desired land along the northern part of the property would have affected Winter Wonderland was not determined before the deal fell through.

In the event another prospective buyer comes forward, Allison said Loyola prefers one-year contracts with the village.

“Nobody knows how much land a future buyer might want, if anyone does approach Loyola,” Allison said. “A one-year contract would allow them to still honor their commitment to us while things with a possible buyer get wrapped up.”

The current multi-year contract expires Dec. 31. Allison said he would prefer another multi-year contract.

Visitors to Winter Wonderland pay $5 per car, Monday through Thursday, and $10, Friday through Sunday. Allison said more than 20,000 cars viewed the show in 2011, and he expects more to attend this year.

The show will be advertised in conjunction with the Lake County Convention and Visitor’s Bureau. Allison said some of their mailers reach as far as DuPage County.

As compensation, Vernon Hills and Loyola split the admission proceeds.

The village has produced Winter Wonderland every year since 1995. It will not be open Dec. 24 or Dec. 25.
A backup site has not been identified if Loyola does sell enough land to bump out Winter Wonderland.

Allison said his staff was not satisfied with preliminary roadside ideas and will continue to brainstorm.

“We’re hoping we won’t have to move,” Allison said. “It might be a long time before a serious bidder is found, and I’m sure Loyola would reconfigure the roads if they do sell some land.”