

EYES ON THE SKY

Advocate Speaks At JMU About Dimming Light Pollution

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By **CALEB M. SOPTELEAN**

HARRISONBURG — It may seem like a daunting task, but Bob Parks has what he thinks is a bright idea: turn down the lights.

Parks, the executive director of the Tucson, Ariz.-based International Dark-Sky Association, spoke at the Ice House on Wednesday night as part of Starry Nights Harrisonburg, a weeklong series of events designed to raise awareness about light pollution.

The organization wants to raise awareness about light pollution and steps one can take to curb it.

“My biggest challenge is explaining to people who have never seen a dark sky why they miss it,” said Parks, who works out of IDA’s Washington, D.C., office. “Once you’ve seen it, you’ll never think about it the same way.”

Some of the things IDA promotes include quality outdoor lighting, its model lighting ordinance and dark sky preservation/ecotourism. The model lighting ordinance is a tool designed to help municipalities develop outdoor lighting standards that reduce glare, light trespass and “skyglow.”

Parks often spends time trying to dispel a number of myths about lighting.

“Less light is actually better for visibility,” he



Light pollution colors the cloudy sky different hues of purple in this long-exposure image taken from the Champions Drive Parking Deck at James Madison University on Thursday. (Photo by Nikki Fox)



A long-exposure image shows streaks of light from Interstate 81 traffic in front of James Madison University’s UREC building and the light pollution in Harrisonburg, as seen from the Carrier Drive bridge on Thursday. (Photo by Nikki Fox)

said. “We’ve done research that shows this.”

Humans have a primal fear of the dark because our ancestors wanted to see what was going to eat them, he said. But this doesn’t make one safer.

“You can make people feel safer [with lighting], but you can’t fix crime with lighting,” he said.

Parks cited a Chicago project called “Alley Lighting” that resulted in “overlighting” residential areas. Crime increased in the areas that were part of the project.

“You don’t ever displace crime more than a block,” he said.

Sixty to 70 percent of outdoor lighting is wasted, Parks said. Because most outdoor light comes from urban areas, that’s where the IDA is focused.

“Twenty-five percent of lights in cities don’t need to be there,” he said.

In residential areas, for example, a vehicle’s headlights illuminate the area fine where the speed is 30 mph or less.

IDA has had a model ordinance since 2011 based on the physics of light.

“It’s comprehensive. It will work in any city, anywhere,” he said.

Few cities have adopted it, however, and none in Virginia have. The MLO “forces the developer to use light intelligently,” he said.

Las Cruces, N.M., and Plymouth, Minn., have adopted the lighting ordinance and the IDA recently signed a contract with Malibu, Calif.

Pepperdine University is interested in it, too.

If his organization can get MLOs established on the outskirts of Los Angeles, which represents some of the worst light pollution in the U.S., then there is hope, Parks says.



Bob Parks, executive director of the International Dark-Sky Association, speaks at the Ice House on Wednesday as part of a weeklong campaign designed to raise awareness of light pollution in the Valley. (Photo by Jason Lenhart)



Bob Parks, who addressed attendees at the Ice House on Wednesday, says that his biggest challenge “is explaining to people who have never seen a dark sky why they miss it.” (Photo by Jason Lenhart)

But the challenge remains because light pollution grows at an estimated rate of 3 to 5 percent a year, Parks said.

Using LED lighting can help reduce light pollution.

“LED lighting can be better than any lighting that’s come before,” Parks said, adding that there have been tremendous improvements in LED lighting over the past 10 years. But he noted that swapping existing lights for LED lights will not entirely solve the problem.

The IDA promotes fully shielded light fixtures and wants to sell every city on using adaptive controls so that changes can be made as technology advances.

For more information go online at www.darksky.org.

Want To Go?

Starry Nights Harrisonburg, a weeklong series designed to raise awareness about light pollution, concludes today with the following events:

2:15 and 3:30 p.m.: Public planetarium show at JMU

6:30 p.m.: The results of a communitywide short film competition will be shown at Court Square Theater

8 to 10 p.m.: Earth Hour on Campus at JMU, Public Star Party at Astronomy Park

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