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## **Hey, fans, this Clydesdale's for you – but now for a \$2,000 fee**

*By ASHLEY SMITH Staff Writer*

A few weeks before Christmas every winter, the famous Anheuser-Busch Clydesdales hitch up on Main Street in Nashua for the annual festival known as the Winter Holiday Stroll.

They've become one of the most popular attractions, as thousands of strollers stop for a closer look or to have their pictures taken with the iconic horses.

The Clydesdales show up for other events, too. In the summer, they're paraded down Nashua's Main Street during the Taste of Downtown celebration. They've made appearances at Christmas and Fourth of July parades in Merrimack and at Milford's Holiday Stroll, too.

The Anheuser-Busch brewery in Merrimack, home to one of three remaining hitch teams nationwide, makes such regular appearances possible.

But all of that could change in light of a recent Anheuser-Busch decision to begin charging \$2,000 for all Clydesdale appearances, with the exception of a few major sporting events.

The service has long been free, sort of an act of good will – and clever marketing – by the country's largest beermaker.

The fee won't come close to covering what Anheuser-Busch spends to bring the Clydesdales to parades, festivals and sporting events: \$8,000 per appearance, according to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. But it's likely to price out nonprofits and other small community organizations with limited budgets.

"That's a lot," said Kristin Wardener, who, as general government secretary for the town of Merrimack, is in charge of planning the parade this year.

Wardener invited the hometown horses, but they were already committed to an event in Washington, D.C.

Instead, the town will bring in Clydesdales from Whispering Brook Farm in Hudson, one of the few farms in the state that owns the breed.

"We're paying for those, but certainly not \$2,000," Wardener said, adding that the town would consider the fee in the future.

Anheuser-Busch says the charge will help manage demand for the horses, which far exceeds the available dates. In a statement issued Wednesday, the company also said the average cost associated with the Clydesdales' local market visits has more than doubled in the last 10 years.

Anheuser-Busch maintains that only its beer distributors, not local organizations, will pay the fee. Decisions on whether to accommodate requests by organizations for free appearances will be made on a case-by-case basis, the company said.

However, it's usually the distributors who book events on behalf of community organizations. Nashua-based Bellavance Beverage Co. books the Clydesdales every year for Great American Downtown, the nonprofit that organizes the Winter Holiday Stroll and Taste of Downtown Nashua.

It's unclear whether Bellavance would pay \$2,000 per event to keep the tradition going. The company didn't return phone calls seeking comment.

Sue Butler, executive director of Great American Downtown, said she'll work with Anheuser-Busch when the time comes to bring the popular attraction back.

"We're going to talk to them," Butler said. "They're certainly a huge aspect to our event, so we'll see what we can work out."

The Clydesdales are closely tied to the Budweiser brand in the minds of Americans – so much that headlines were made earlier this year when Anheuser-Busch decided for the first time in eight years not to run a Super Bowl advertisement featuring them.

The company later reversed that decision after fans on its Facebook page voted for a 60-second Clydesdale spot as their favorite of three commercials.

Anheuser-Busch is well aware of the powerful brand image the Clydesdales evoke.

"The Clydesdales are critical to Budweiser's heritage and imagery," the company's statement said. "We value the Clydesdale appearances as a unique way to market Budweiser and Anheuser-Busch and believe their value exceeds the costs associated with showcasing them."

Less than two years after the all-American company sold to InBev, a Belgian brewer famous for its appetite for cost-cutting, retaining that brand image is critical.

But will charging \$2,000 for appearances tarnish it?

According to Daniel Ennis, dean of the Whittemore School of Business and professor of marketing at the University of New Hampshire in Durham, probably not. Members of groups affected by the charge will tell other people, but news of the fee will probably never reach most consumers, he said.

"I don't think it's going to have a broad impact," he said.

However, Ennis, who has memories of Clydesdales dating to childhood trips to the Ohio State Fair, said the counterargument is that Anheuser-Busch loses an opportunity to “build incredible good will” with the people who interact with the horses at community events.

Those people leave the events with a positive feeling about the brand, he said.

“I wonder if they’re underestimating the value of that good will,” he said.

Michael McGrath, CEO of the Thomas Group and author of the book “Business Decisions, said, “The fee makes sense, given current economic conditions.

“In today’s economy, companies need to cut back. It’s logical to say, ‘We’ll charge a nominal fee.’”

McGrath said the decision probably didn’t come directly from InBev. It likely came from decision-makers in the U.S., who were given a smaller budget than expected by InBev, he said.

When InBev announced plans to buy Anheuser-Busch in July 2008, beer industry experts expressed some concern that the first things to go under InBev’s cost-cutting model would be the iconic symbols that have connected Budweiser to American communities, including the Clydesdales, the theme park and corporate sponsorships.

But much of that hasn’t come to pass – at least not yet.

Despite the \$2,000 fee, the advantage of living in southern New Hampshire is that the Clydesdales are never far away.

Even if they don’t make it to community events in the future, the first stop on the Merrimack brewery’s free tour is the Clydesdale Hamlet.

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