

THE POLITICS OF DANCING

By Jon Fillman

Don't Forget
These 5 Key
Considerations as
You Put Your Best
Foot Forward.



If you're considering producing a new outdoor special event or festival involving parks, streets or other public spaces, you'll want to visit the local government office or its designee to inquire about the fees, schedules and policies that regulate use of public space in the community. The information typically prepared is designed to guide interested parties in understanding how to apply for and secure the required permissions and permits. Before you take that step, take a moment to consider several more nuanced factors that are often overlooked. Things like evidence of demand, sustainability and a focus on the development of constructive relationships early in the process all play vital roles in determining where, when, and if the event you're envisioning will actually materialize.

1. Is There Evidence of Demand for the Event in the Community?

You've been thinking about it for years. It's the greatest event ever! Something you've never quite seen in the community before. Even the reception from your colleagues is encouraging. Ask yourself this: "Is this the best way to identify a need?" Is this idea based on your personal interest, organizational need, or is it based on a community need? How do these interests coincide with those of the community? This key step is foundational. Identify those points, write them down in bold letters, thoughtfully consider what that looks like, and create a list of actions steps from there. Just as is said in entrepreneurship, 'don't just start a business - solve a problem.' Special events and festivals can be used to address problems, or just as easily can become problems if not built on a solid foundation.

Let's assume there's already a built-in audience within the community for the event. And because this audience is made up of community residents and day-trippers from adjacent areas you've probably got a win-

ning idea already. If your event is attracting visitors from out of the area, however, think about how their attendance as well as the event as a whole, could improve the quality of life for area residents? How can the event leave a positive, lasting impression? While cities, counties and states will appreciate the benefits of increased tax revenues from outside sources, local government will respond to the citizens they serve. If you have strong community support, nonprofit and local government support for the event will naturally follow.

Make sure you're building on a model that's trending up. Always outline the pros and cons of an event with evidence of demand in mind. Event plans are really just small business plans and business plans are only as good as the research, evidence and facts that support them. Take time to carefully analyze the market and local climate. Reach out to local leaders, business owners, potential sponsors and local media to gauge interest. Much can be learned and many pitfalls avoided through the vetting process.

Finally, and most importantly, seek feedback from the specific areas or districts in which the event will be held. Too often

community engagement is an afterthought and not in the forefront of planning. It may be challenging but community engagement is a rewarding process that requires a fair amount of time and sensitivity to diverse opinions and competing priorities. In preliminary conversations and meetings be forthcoming and realistic when outlining outputs and outcomes to help assure neighborhood support and trust is poised to remain strong beyond the initial public announcement or the event's inaugural year.

2. Is the Event Sustainable?

Some may think about sustainability as a purely financial challenge. To the same degree, consider the community's capacity to support the event socially, politically, and environmentally. The concept of sustainability over time could either mean the time of initial public announcement to the time that occurs, or it could be a reference to the period of time between event occurrences. Whichever the case, create a list of potential weaknesses and threats that could negatively impact the event and determine the best strategies to proactively address those issues should they arise. Here's an example: Think about the word, competition. If you've got a great event idea, there will eventually be competition. This could be competition for the event's concept, established date, location, resources, attendees...I'll dare to say it - the VOLUNTEERS!?! What is your plan to protect and preserve the event property, its market share, sponsorships and investments, its commitments to supporters? How will you turn the threat of competition into an opportunity to improve the event? As you spend time working through each scenario, you'll discover that preparedness is a key component of achieving and maintaining sustainability.

What if you determine the event has clear community support but is simply not financially sustainable? Well, you could quit. But seriously, that's when you'll need to decide if it's adequate to prepare alternate ideas such as a scaled down option with less risk, partner with the competition or if you would rather seek outside support to maintain the event as originally conceived. Financially sustainable events are attractive, durable, nimble and responsive, a goal shared by organizations of all types and sizes and an important attribute of the events that have endured decades of change. Launching an event organically can provide a solid foundation over the long run. In comparison, there is something to be said when the benefits of an event to a community garner the support of local government, providing advantages that balance the playing field. The event may also present a

unique opportunity for private sector partnerships; the event may not require a great deal of attention to innovation or change as long as that support is committed and remains. Yet one lackluster performance under the pressure of public reporting or private investments could leave the event at risk of collapse without the mechanisms to seamlessly recover and continue.

3. Should you Seek Sponsorship or Partnership with the Local Government?

Securing and managing a sponsorship agreement with local government can also consume time and resources that reduce the overall financial benefits. Keep in mind that events sponsored by public agencies are often subject to unique conditions and requirements. However, support and endorsement of an event by local government helps to bolster credentials for other event fundraising and sponsorship efforts. Government support can provide advantages beyond cash or in-kind contributions such as a higher priority or guaranteed access to public space. There's a variety of methods cities use to conduct event sponsorship and support programs. It's important to have an understanding of available programs and timelines, the minimum criteria and how any existing sponsorships were established. And what about broader strategic partnerships? Local governments are generally attracted to opportunities to partner with organizations that help them deliver services to citizens and visitors in a more efficient manner. Can a one-day or weekend event deliver on a sponsorship that makes a positive difference? Absolutely. But an annual strategic partnership may open the door for a scope of work that is greater than a single event or moment in time. If your motivation is to play a role in remedying a known community challenge through special events, focus your efforts on how your organization and the work it conducts throughout the year naturally align with the goals and visions of local governing bodies. If the event is not prepared to meet the criteria for sponsorship, and the organization producing the event is not strongly suited to work with government as a larger strategic partner, the focus should naturally be on sponsorships and partnerships with corporate, private and charitable funding sources.

4. How Can Your Event Compliment Other Municipal Priorities?

It is important to stay keyed in to the ebbs and flows of municipal capacity limits in providing required support resources such as police, fire and sanitation, in granting accommodations

for time and space, and sponsorship support. There are limited amounts of all three and there is almost always competition for the highest and best uses. Cities manage both long range and short range plans that largely reflect the community's priorities. Review these plans as well as the city's budget, committee meeting minutes, blogs and social media posts. Follow local news of proposed special events, and follow public dialog after events. Be sensitive to those factors as you evaluate the field. In studying these items consider where, when and how your event best fits. Here's an example of how priorities can both coincide and compete: A new foot race for downtown streets will help promote health and wellness while raising funds for charity. Health and wellness are quality of life indicators. Activities that promote a high quality of life align with a local government priority. It's also a local government priority to encourage use of public transportation and expand transit service routes. Investments have been made to promote public transit improvements and a downtown race will interrupt service delivery at a critical time. The organizer of the race is well aware of these considerations and hasn't lost any time selecting a starting location served by a new transit stop. The organizer has researched transit schedules and plans the route to avoid most interruptions. A portion of proceeds from the race will support a local charity that is working to install covered bus shelters. The event's website promotes transit service routes overall and monthly bus passes are included with early bird registration. Plus, there's a free single day pass for spectators! The event is titled, Race to the Bus! The community is on board.

5. Are You Prepared to Execute? Do You Have Knowledgeable and Reliable Resources In Place?

Overall, hold your ideas in confidence and wait to start any serious conversations until you have as many of your ducks in a row as possible. When you're ready to move from visioning at 30,000 feet, change your focus to more ground level logistics. This may be the time to schedule meetings with government staff and other local agencies to gain an understanding of the process for permitting and approval. Know what has been approved in other instances. If there appears to be any discrepancies in your plans to do something similar, inquire about ways to modify the plan and continue forward. Bring a few team members who can best speak to specific components of the plan. Be sure to have

all documents available in a format that is descriptive, clear and concise. Your performance in meetings with local officials will prove you have done your homework, you'll be confident in your plan and will leave everyone with a positive first impression. You will want to know your own business, and the business of other events with similarities to yours. You want to show that you and your team are competent and capable of executing the event as proposed. When that message is clear, be assured that where flexibility exists you'll be on the receiving end of the most positive, expedited outcomes before, during and after the event.

So yes, outdoor special events are inherently products that use spaces not specifically created for the purpose, and sometimes, that's the purpose. Special events and festivals can become temporary micro-climates, challenging opinions of what could be. Outdoor special event and festival organizers can most successfully navigate just about any political landscape by thoughtfully building relationships within the community early in the planning process. Organizers should keep in mind the needs and desires of stakeholders that could experience both positive and negative impacts as a result of the event. Even the smallest matters can become political when priorities compete, when planning and preparation for the big dance are sidelined by unanticipated threats. As event organizers, nonprofit organizations, community members and government officials, we continually search for opportunities to work together, to negotiate for the greater good and benefit of the whole. Help the community help you create the best dance ever!

Jon Fillman joined the City of Asheville, NC in 2007 and is responsible for outdoor special event administration under the Community & Economic Development department. Asheville's outdoor public spaces have grown to accommodate over 400 festival and special event occasions annually, all of which are designed and produced by independent businesses and nonprofit organizations. Prior to relocating to Asheville, Jon served as director of quality assurance for National Cinema Network in Philadelphia, program manager for SPI Marketing in New York, fulfillment manager for LPI Media in New York, and advertising & conference coordinator for Kelby Media, Tampa.