



New York City's Summer of Play 2021

Recommendations to Simplify the City's Event Processes and Support Community Groups in Organizing Public Events in the Streets

NYC A Summer of Play 2021

Planning a non-motorized public event on a street in New York City, whether a block party, a street festival, or a small street event, is a wonderful way to bring a community together, to get to know neighbors - even those from across the street - and, as we emerge from a year of living indoors, a way to rebuild our relationships to one another and to our neighborhoods. **But planning an event on the streets of NYC is a complicated and confusing process lacking in operational clarity and coordination and devoid of enforcement support from city agencies.** If the city wants to have a Summer of Play, the city also needs to redesign the process for producing street events and to start supporting communities that want to come together in their streets.

This document walks the reader through what it was like for volunteers to produce a street event on a quiet residential street on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. With information gathered from this experience, Open Plans gives reasons to support sidestepping the standard permit process and creating a simple, self-certified "community use" permit. This community use permit would encourage community groups and individuals to activate their streets and produce events that are fun, engaging and enriching to neighbors.

Application Process/ Required Documents

Open Plans/StreetopiaUWS worked with partners to produce a street event on West 103rd Street between Broadway and West End Avenue in Manhattan. The event took place on Saturday, April 24, from noon until 5:30PM on an Open Street block. The event drew hundreds of visitors, elected officials and candidates for public office, and allowed the community to come together in a joyful, playful, safe, connected way (please enjoy [this short clip of the event](#)).

The planning process started on February 22, when StreetopiaUWS, acting on behalf of the 103rd Street Open Streets Community Coalition, submitted an application for an Earth Day Street Event to take place on the Open Street. The NYC Department of Transportation acted as the lead sponsor, which allowed the permitting entity, the Street Activity Permit Office (SAPO) to waive fees for the event. Without this city sponsorship, depending on the classification of the event, our group would've paid a permit fee of anywhere from a \$25 application fee to a \$25,000 event fee. See the breakdown of fees for permits [here](#).

As a group of people who have navigated this permitting process before, we knew the questions to ask and figured out how to properly submit this application. However, for many new applicants, the SAPO permitting site would be unnecessarily confusing. This office issues permits for Block Parties and Street Festivals and Street Events and Single Block Street Events, with different rules and regulations for each type of event. ([See here](#) for a list of the permits issued by SAPO.) As we've learned from the city's vaccination efforts and online school efforts, access to computers, the internet and the information necessary to navigate city systems is not universal. It is inherently discriminatory to expect such.

To simplify and clarify this process, while making it accessible to all, SAPO should create a self-certified, free permit applicable to all volunteer groups that want to produce a recreational, community-building event on their residential street or on an Open Street.

Part of the Street Event application included a liability requirement, which we were able to have waived by writing a "hardship letter." In the letter, we told SAPO that we are a group of volunteers maintaining and managing the Open Street and, as such, we aren't a cohesive non-profit or for-profit organization with access to **\$ 1MM in liability insurance**. Most groups that want to organize a fun party for their block or their Open Street don't carry liability insurance and, again, it's discriminatory to require it. For these types of community-building events, the city should waive any SAPO fees and liability requirements associated with the permit application. This includes fees for the application, sound permit, and more.

For a Street Event (and other types of events), SAPO prevents groups from selecting a **rain date** should the weather not cooperate on the day of the event. Given the amount of work it takes to plan an event, especially one where organizers are coordinating with performers, staff, volunteers, neighbors, etc., it's reasonable for the city to allow organizers to choose and publicize a rain date. Similarly, the city should eliminate the requirement that permits be obtained 60 to 90 days before the event. Seven days seems like a reasonable amount of time.

Next, we called the 24th Precinct and spoke to its Community Affairs officer. The officer informed us that we could put up **No Parking signs** - which the precinct would provide - but that they wouldn't enforce the signs. Though we were thrilled that the NYPD would provide signs, the fact that they don't enforce the signs sends a signal that these events are not a priority for the police. In fact, such events are the perfect time for police to get to know their community and to start practicing community policing. As a matter of fact, if police officers decided to visit the Open Streets while events were taking place, they could see how enriching they are. It is our strong recommendation that NYPD No Parking signs should carry weight and that the city needs to coordinate to both ticket and tow the cars of drivers who ignore the signs. Traffic and parked cars are antithetical to a safe event and a safe environment for performers, kids, and all visitors to an event.

We also informed the officer that we submitted a request for a **sound permit**. The Community Affairs officer wasn't sure of the procedure for granting this permit, but he assured us that it wouldn't be a problem. He knew there was a fee for the permit, but he also wasn't sure of how much the fee was.

Once this work was done, we needed to sign a **Health and Safety Plan Affirmation**, which is a three-page SAPO form that lists requirements for organizers such as keeping a log of attendees and their contact information, creating distancing markers, having extra masks on hand, etc. Given that the CDC has relaxed outdoor masking rules and Governor Cuomo eased the mask mandate, this Safety Plan Affirmation needs to be rethought. Furthermore, without hiring a public safety monitor or having the city provide one, these regulations are too burdensome for community groups and should be altered.

Lastly, we submitted a **Site Plan** and a **Run of Show** (essentially a performance schedule). The site plan required a 15-foot emergency lane, which ended up being impossible because 11 drivers decided not to move their parked cars.

This is the end of the application process. The following is our firsthand experience leading up to the event.

Street Arts 103 Event

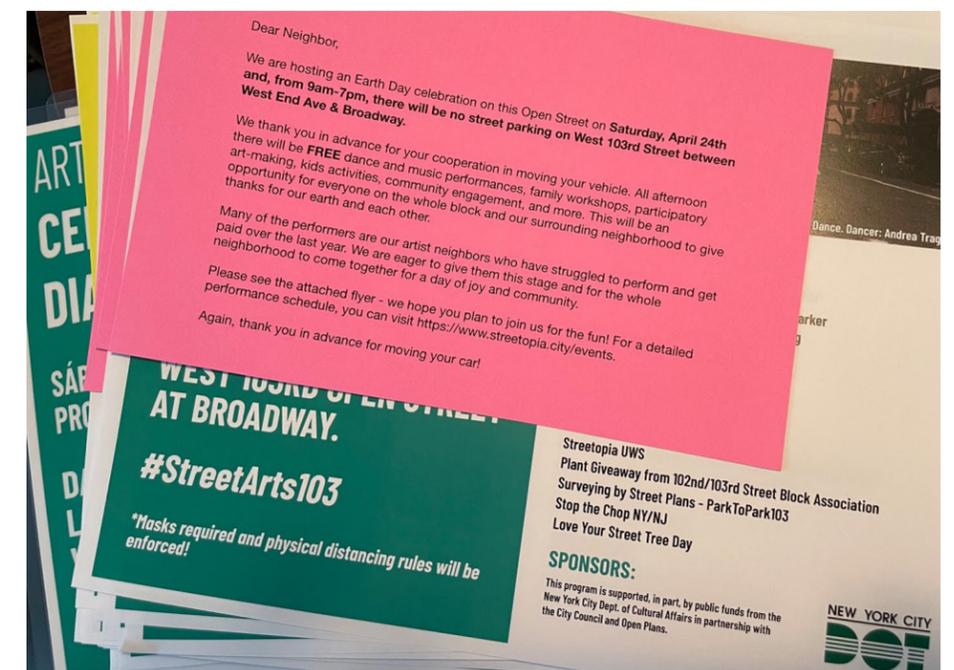


The week of the event, we held rehearsals on the street. The street was filled with debris, sand, and rocks, with two dead rats in the middle of the street, right where our programming would be happening and children would be playing. We realized that we needed to clean the performance space and might require help to do so. We quickly lodged a 311 complaint for the dead rats, asked DOT and our Council Member for help with street cleanup, and tweeted at DSNY.

We were told by the Council Member's office that 1) our Open Streets coalition should have submitted a sanitation plan (though this isn't a requirement for a Temporary Limited Access Open Street like 103rd Street); and 2) that if street sweepers don't move barricades at the entrance to Open Streets, then the curbside lanes don't get swept. In follow up questions, DSNY refuted this and said that the sweepers do in fact move barricades.

Through this process, we realized that the **City needs to provide better information to Council Members, Community Boards, NYPD and any agency or group interfacing with the public regarding Open Streets and Street Events.** From our experience, none of these groups/agencies had accurate information about Open Streets, what they are used for, or how they should be cared for and by whom.

We made sure that we were on the street on Thursday morning for street sweeping on the north side of the street and on Friday morning for street sweeping on the south side of the street. For alternate side street sweeping, many parkers never moved and DSNY didn't ticket, so only a portion of the curbside was swept. At the same time, we placed eight NYPD No Parking signs on each side of the street and flyered all of the cars with an invite to the event and a note telling them that they needed to move their cars, as per the NYPD No Parking signs.



On the morning of the event, we started cleaning the street at 8AM. We hired two people to help our team of volunteers and borrowed supplies from the local Columbus Amsterdam BID. The street was so dirty that it took our team three hours to clean the block. If Mayor Bill de Blasio's recently-announced Clean Up crews come to fruition, **the City should assign at least three of these paid city staff to each Street Event and should coordinate with street sweeping teams to properly ticket and tow vehicles parked** during alternate side street sweeping days leading up to a Street Event. Among our team of street cleaners, there was a sense of satisfaction and pride in seeing a cleaner, healthier street. Communities will start seeing their streets in a different light if they are cleaned up and used for play, inspiration and connection.



We barricaded the Open Street completely at 9AM, using a leftover NYPD barricade and the two DOT metal barricades that are currently used for the Open Street. Parkers were supposed to leave by 9AM. This would give us time to clean the curbside lane and set up our event, including that critical 15-foot emergency lane. At 9:30AM, street furniture was dropped off by truck by the DOT. The furniture was caked with grime, so our team set about scrubbing and waiting for the parkers to move.

By 11:20AM - forty minutes before the start of our event - there were still 11 cars parked on the street. We called the Community Affairs officer and went to the precinct to ask for an officer to ticket the cars and tow. We were told that NYPD didn't have the officers to ticket. They also said that it was "impossible" to get Traffic there to tow the cars. Most of these drivers never moved their cars, and we had to set up the event around them. Two cars were moved DURING the event, forcing hundreds of people to move out of the way so the drivers could exit the block. This also meant that the emergency vehicle lane was impossible to set up, creating extra stress for the organizers. Had there been an actual emergency, we would have needed to move tables and chairs and people off the street immediately. This is not fair to the organizers or the people enjoying the event.

DOT and SAPO need to communicate with both NYPD and Traffic¹ to ensure that parkers are ticketed and towed. Without this type of enforcement, drivers know that they can leave their cars parked with no consequences. NYC streets maintenance, DOT and NYPD salaries are funded with taxpayer money. Communities have the right to use the streets and should be supported to do so. Furthermore, the NYPD should identify a point of contact for the day of the event so organizers can freely communicate with that person should issues arise.

As it turned out, this particular street event was a wild success - but it wasn't without its stresses, headaches, and substantial work by the organizers. Much of this work included navigating the city requirements and performing city functions, such as cleaning, coordinating between agencies, and "policing" the parkers. If the city wants to encourage street events and facilitate communities coming together, it needs to make this process much simpler and more coordinated. Until then, successful events will be limited to communities with the volunteer and financial resources to navigate this process, thereby making street events inequitable. All communities deserve access to joyful, healthy ways to come together to celebrate this summer.

¹ Open Plans is still learning more about "Traffic." We were told by NYPD that the tow trucks with NYPD insignias are not part of the NYPD but rather part of "Traffic." Is that DOT? How are they informed about vehicles that need to be towed? Are there really only two of these tow trucks per borough?

Recommendations

Community Use Permits

- Create a free, self-certified permit for 'Community Use' whereby community groups, Open Streets volunteers, Block Associations and other neighborhood groups can simply host a community event on a non-arterial, residential street. These events would be open to the public. **Waive all SAPO fees** associated with these events, including sound permits and application fees. This simple and free process is exactly what the city did for Outdoor Dining and should be replicated with the general public.
- Eliminate the need for community groups to provide **liability insurance** for non-motorized community events. These events make the streets safer. The city should extend its normal business operations of insuring the streets, whether it's for motorized traffic (the status quo) or a non-motorized event.
- Allow groups to choose and publicize **rain dates** for any Community Use event. These events require months of coordination, including securing and paying performers, hiring workers, purchasing supplies. Groups should be reassured that if the weather doesn't cooperate, the city will honor their permit on another predetermined day.
- Update (or eliminate) the **Health and Safety Plan Affirmation** rules and/or provide a city-paid public health or safety monitor for these events, following the guidelines of the CDC on outdoor events.
- Provide **better information** to Council Members, Community Boards, NYPD and any agency or group interfacing with the public regarding Open Streets and Street Events.
- Allocate at least 3 city-paid workers, per block, as **clean-up crews** for Street Events and Open Streets.
- In the lead-up to an event, DOT and SAPO should communicate with DSNY to ensure that the street sweeper has a team that can ticket and tow parkers who don't move their vehicles. This would increase the likelihood that the curbside lanes get cleaned before people are using the street for an event.
- For the day of the event, DOT and SAPO need to communicate with both NYPD and Traffic to ensure that parkers are ticketed and towed. Without this, community events aren't safe. Additionally, NYPD should assign an officer as a point of contact for the day of the event. This officer can handle any issues that arise and communicate with other officers and traffic enforcement agents for ticketing and towing.
- Reduce the number of Street Event Types on the SAPO site. Eliminate the requirement that applications must be submitted with 60 days notice (and in some cases, 90 days notice).
- Create a simple checklist on the SAPO site with each step that is required to organize a street event on a non-motorized street.
- In the follow-up, post-event email sent by Citywide Event Coordination and Management (CECM) - the group that oversees SAPO - the city should take the opportunity to survey the people who produced an event to learn about the process and to continue iterating and improving it. Instead of saying "we take great pride in ensuring each event regardless of size or scope is treated with the highest level of coordination," the city should SHOW that they mean this by better understanding if they delivered on this point of pride.

The Future of Streets Events and Open Streets Activations



DOT, NYPD, SAPO, DSNY, CECM. In NYC, there are multiple city agencies involved in the planning and production of Street Events. But, for a seamlessly coordinated event, coordination between these agencies falls on community groups. It doesn't need to be this complicated. As shown through the illustrative example above, community groups can handle all aspects of an event without help from the city (other than enforcing rules), including permitting, community engagement, press/PR, coordination, sanitation, and activation. But this comes with inherent costs - cleaning dead rats and filthy streets, dealing with hostile parkers, flyers for days leading up to an event - that are all labor-intensive. Groups need a funding source to support this type of public space management. Until the city properly funds our public spaces, groups should be allowed to raise funds in creative ways.

Here's how:

If the city handed over residential streets to the people who live on them, residents could make their streets come alive with people and community and fun. All it takes is a little imagination and flexibility.

- The Department of Transportation produces a street hierarchy that clearly delineates Arterial Streets - such as those necessary for truck routes, bus routes, bike corridors, etc. - from Residential Streets - such as those that are not critical for through traffic.
- On any Residential Street, Open Streets partners or other community groups can activate the streets by submitting a one-page, self-certified application for events to the Department of Transportation.
- The city *insures* the streets, whether they are for motorized traffic or for people gathering in the streets.
- Communities can build storage sheds in the curbside lane to hold tables, chairs and barricades that can be used for activations, community dinners, musical performances, or a talk by the local precinct. This obviates a DOT centralized storage unit, a DOT truck dropping off and picking up supplies and would allow neighbors to come together routinely.
- If an event requires drivers to move their parked cars, neighbors post NO PARKING signs one week before an event. NYPD and Traffic work together to ticket and tow any cars that remain parked on the day of the event.

- Nearby restaurants can deliver food to patrons who order using QR codes. Alternatively, food carts can sell food at events in return for a nominal fee paid to the organizers.
- The city allows community members and Open Streets coalitions to think creatively about their streets and how to make them financially self-sustaining. This could include ticketed performances, such as with the Open Culture program, a small fee paid by fitness instructors to activate the street (and peoples' bodies) or naming rights to benches placed in parklet spots on the street.



