

Council regulations crash street parties

Christopher Murn

So, you have taken it upon yourself to throw a street party for your neighbours over the holidays. It wouldn't be a bad idea—you would be doing your part to promote social interaction in your community.

But plan ahead. Navigating the bureaucratic hurdles that governments place in front of street parties takes a lot of work.

Here are some things that must be considered for such an event: council permits, public liability insurance, noise level infringements, traffic management plans, crowd control, food handling regulations, alcohol consumption, risk assessment, police checks, invitations, rubbish disposal, canvassing the street for road closure approval, obtaining road barriers and notification to police, ambulance and fire services.

You will be forced to spend a lot of time corresponding with your neighbours before any event takes place. Approval by at least 75 per cent of the street's residents is required for the road closure. Then guests must be invited and attendance confirmed. Don't forget to ask your fellow residents for a contribution to cover the costs of the party. You may even be required to deliver written safe food-handling instructions, so do not be surprised if your neighbours are 'out' when you come calling.

Not only will you be consuming your time preparing a street party, but your money as well. Most councils require the coordinator to hold a certificate of public liability insurance for at least \$10,000,000 worth of cover. Add to this permit fees, equipment hire, food and drinks, and things are starting to become very costly. Last year, it would have cost a citizen in the City of Whitehorse (Victoria) over \$1,000 to hold a street party before a single sausage was sizzled.

Street party organisers in the City of Rockdale (NSW) are required to pay a temporary road closure permit fee of \$187 and an additional \$29 per six metres of closed road. Furthermore, Rockdale requires applications three months in advance of the event. Certainly, some councils waive the application fee for community events or non-profit organisations, but most other councils demand an application or permit fee in excess of \$100. (This often includes hire of street barriers.)

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The Moreland Street Party Kit cover features a drummer. Drumming would however exceed the 65 decibel limit for street parties in Moreland.

There are also road safety legislation and regulations to consider. NSW residents must comply with Part 8 of the RTA *Guidelines for Traffic Facilities*. Victorian residents must abide by the *Road Safety Act 1986* which, if neglected, may result in a \$6,607 fine.

If you are lucky enough to reside in Townsville, you may be eligible for up to \$500 to meet the expense of food, drink and party equipment, courtesy of Mayor Tony Mooney. Although effective at reducing the cost of parties, it creates perverse incentives to overindulge. Furthermore, it does not reduce the bureaucracy of organising a street party.

Don't think that you will have time to relax; you will be preoccupied with your duties as event co-ordinator. In the City of Stonnington (Victoria), event co-ordinators must follow a 25-page safety plan. The safety plan makes event co-ordinators safety wardens, responsible for abiding by the safety plan and controlling the safety organisation, which comprises the safety warden and any additional wardens.

As a safety warden in Stonnington, you will have to complete a complicated seven-step risk-assessment process in accordance with AS/NZS (Joint Australian/New Zealand) risk management standards. Fortunately, you will have five response guides to follow, ranging from vehicle accidents to electrical failures, and several prewritten emergency announcements to memorise.

If Stonnington's safety plan is to be believed, you can expect to suffer anxiety, stress, injury, frustration, panic, aggravation, coupled with the possibility of catastrophic events including drunken, riotous and disruptive behaviour, fires, electrocution, food poisoning, illness, hearing loss and property damage.

You may be forgiven for now thinking a street party is not worth the effort. But don't despair—the Victorian state government implemented a \$500,000 programme last year to save the street party. Though not yet adopted by all councils, it involves a grant of \$6,000 to each council to develop a street party kit. A street party kit typically includes a 'how to' publication, model traffic management plans, a council barbeque and two café-style umbrellas.

The central issue of the 'Go For Your Life' street party initiative is the relief of public liability insurance burdens on event co-ordinators. The pilot project in the City of Port Phillip (Victoria) did this by registering the event co-ordinators as volunteers in order to invoke a concession for non-profit ventures. Melbourne City Council avoids this problem simply by meeting the costs of public liability insurance for co-ordinators through the Carlton Police and Community Consultative Committee. In NSW, the City of Ryde amended its Casual Hirers Policy to

allow residents to hire the street as they would a hall, reducing the cost of public liability insurance to \$20 per event. Most other councils still require co-ordinators to obtain a certificate of public liability coverage at their own expense.

Though these street party kits go a long way towards informing event co-ordinators and streamlining the application process, they do little to remove the regulatory burdens that complicate the exercise. Event co-ordinators are being actively encouraged to throw street parties but, at the same time, must still comply with the absurd regulatory requirements.

In the City of Moreland (Victoria), street party co-ordinators are required to employ an independent acoustic engineer to monitor sound levels at the event if they expect them to exceed 65 decibels. To put this in perspective, a car exhaust must not exceed 90 decibels in Victoria, a lawnmower puts out around 90 decibels, a hairdryer 70 decibels, while laughter is 65 decibels. Therefore, to throw a street party in Moreland, you must either hire a sound engineer or ask your neighbours to refrain from laughing too loudly.

Forget about having a cake store or letting the kids run a lemonade stand; this will require temporary food trading and handling permits from your local council. Your children will have to be very bright indeed to understand the plethora of requirements and guidelines, fill out all the permits and develop a pricing strategy that will allow them to recoup the permit fee. If you live in the City of Port Phillip, your children must sell 50 glasses of lemonade, at \$1 a glass, to cover the cost of the permit alone. Further:

- In Victoria, in the Shire of Yarra Ranges, event co-ordinators must notify bus services of road closures and meet the costs of alternative routes;
- Port Phillip City Council requires that event co-ordinators undergo a police background check;
- In the City of Boroondara, street parties should not interfere with vehicular access to residents' properties. This is particularly difficult given that barriers will be erected by the council when closing the street;

- Whitehorse City Council's street party guide recommends that food not be prepared by a person with an infectious illness and prohibits the use of umbrellas on a windy day. Presumably Whitehorse citizens lack the common sense to take these precautions of their own accord;
- The City of Stonnington recommends that event co-ordinators wear fluoro jackets and carry area maps, almost certainly to prevent them from becoming lost on their own streets. Additionally, event co-ordinators are to carry sunscreen to ensure that guests are not burnt on a sunny day.
- In New South Wales, residents of the City of Canada Bay are prohibited from erecting permanent(!) barbeque structures on a council road.
- And in South Australia, in the City of Mitcham, environmental health officers may attend street parties to make sure your sausages aren't pink in the middle.

So by all means go ahead and throw a street party—just don't play any music, tell any jokes and don't let the old lady down the street sell her cakes and cookies. Your local council wants you to have fun but only on their terms; they even go so far as to make condescending suggestions about how to have fun in their street party kits.

Community spirit is invaluable; however it is not something that can be manufactured. If the government would like to increase community participation and involvement, they should first remove the restrictions that inhibit citizens from interacting with each other.

While the use of a council barbeque and two café-style umbrellas won't bring back the street party, the strongest message of the 'Go For Your Life' street party initiative is that citizens are still allowed to throw a street party in this age of mad bureaucracy.

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