

Balboa Park Special Events on 6th Avenue & the West Mesa: Sharing Boundaries with the Community

REPORT OF THE WEST MESA SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE BALBOA PARK COMMITTEE

I. INTRODUCTION

Special events that take place on the west side of Balboa Park present serious challenges for the communities of Bankers Hill and Park West. This has become a frequent reality due to the popularity of the Park's western border as a venue for a year-round cavalcade of special events, as well as by several very popular annual parades and seemingly continuous weekend walks and runs that draw large numbers of participants. Workable solutions require effective planning, diligent enforcement of clear policies and procedures, and an attitude of mutual support and cooperation.

This Subcommittee Report describes recent experiences with special events along the west side of the Park, and makes observations and recommendations to the Balboa Park Committee in the following categories:

- A. Traffic & Crowd Control and Parking
- B. Noise and Sound Amplification
- C. Event Permitting
- D. Landscape Impacts
- E. Good Neighbor Policy
- F. Security Deposits
- G. Penalties
- H. Full Cost Recovery

II. ISSUES, OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. TRAFFIC & CROWD CONTROL AND PARKING

How can parking and traffic circulation issues be addressed to minimize the disruptive effects on adjacent neighborhoods?

The Problem

- Past special events have resulted in serious adverse impacts in Bankers Hill and Park West caused by temporary parking restrictions and street closures.
- Often the parking restrictions and street closures appear unrelated to the actual needs of the special events – and have unduly restricted the access of members of the local community to their residences.
- Larger special events, due simply to their size, have backed up traffic not only on the Cabrillo Bridge but also for two blocks or more into the community. A prominent example of this is west on Laurel Street and in both directions on 6th Avenue.
- This traffic congestion has not only made it inconvenient for residents and businesses in the community, but also presents public safety problems.

- When parking lots in the Park have reached capacity:
 - The Laurel Street entrance to the Park has traffic backed up all the way across the Cabrillo Bridge only for drivers to find they have to continue to "crawl" through the Central Mesa and add to congestion and pollution because there is no parking available in any parking lots in the Park.
 - Adjacent community parking & traffic are further impacted by cars circling streets looking for parking spots that do not exist.
 - Although they are both very popular, **Earth Day** and **December Nights** are two high profile examples of parking and traffic congestion impacts that are impossible to adequately mitigate.
 - During special events that draw large crowds, pedestrians and pedicabs add to the congestion, especially when they jaywalk or ignore other traffic rules.
 - Cars have been known to enter the Park going the wrong way on one-way streets such as Juniper to access the **Haunted Trail** special event.

Recommendations

- Special events that create a demand for more than a specified percentage of the Park's parking lot capacity should provide shuttles from remote off-site locations to minimize parking in adjacent communities.
- Public Transit options, parking and shuttle services must be required in all special event promotional materials and advertising. These should include the location of paid lots and parking structures that are available to the public.
- Restricted parking on 6th Avenue and adjacent streets should only last for the duration of special events – not long before or after the special event impacting the streets or the Park has started or finished.
- Traffic signage for special events should be standardized, and temporary traffic signage should be made easier to read.
- Larger special events should be required to provide shuttle services and off-site parking outside of the neighborhood in proportion to their size.
- Vendors should be required to park in parking lots on the outskirts of the Park, out of the adjacent communities and/or offsite entirely.
- Larger special events should have a formal traffic circulation management plan, as is done with relative success for **December Nights**.
- Temporary parking permits for adjacent West Mesa neighborhoods should be considered.

B. NOISE AND SOUND AMPLIFICATION

How can noise and sound amplification volume issues be effectively addressed? Should decibel and volume limitations be established, and if so how should they be enforced?

The Problem

1. Excessive sound is caused by both the placement and volume of loudspeakers.

2. Primary impacts relate to loudspeakers being located on or adjacent to 6th Avenue.
3. Sound is often directed at, rather than away from, residences.

Examples of problems with loudspeaker placement and resulting impacts include:

- a. The speakers for the **Rock n 'Roll Marathon** were set up along the west sidewalk on 6th Avenue (across the street from the Park) because they were used to give instructions to the runners as they lined up. Since they were placed about every 100 feet and used to address only runners in the street, the volume did not need to be as loud as it was.
- b. The loudspeakers for the **Race for Literacy** were also placed close together on 6th Avenue. The event sponsor's representatives indulged in continuous and gratuitous chatter during the time between races.
- c. **Children's races** that use 6th Avenue (from Laurel to Quince Streets) are relatively brief in duration. Since there are only a few hundred runners and very few spectators, the races could be relocated to Balboa Drive without disrupting the activities at each end of the race - eliminating the need to close any part of 6th Avenue, or place loud speakers on either side of 6th Avenue.
- d. The **San Diego Track Club** uses a bullhorn for their training sessions on Tuesday evenings, but used a loudspeaker for a small event held on the sidewalk on the east side of 6th Avenue between Maple and Nutmeg Streets last month.
- e. Events that are in place for relatively long periods of time, such as the **Haunted Trail** are particularly difficult to monitor on a continuous basis.

Recommendations

- The special event planning process should require more specific information that should lead to improved noise mitigation.
- A "buffer zone" between special events and 6th Avenue should be established, and sound stages and amplification equipment should be relocated to direct sound away from 6th Avenue.
- Established City Ordinances related to decibel level and volume limitations should be enforced.
- A volume meter should be used by residents and the Subcommittee to begin monitoring sound levels at special events.
- Park Rangers should be supplied with and trained to use volume meters.
- Park policy governing sound levels should be enforced by Park Rangers, as well as security personnel or police assigned to larger special events utilizing amplified sound.
- Decibel monitoring should apply to both the public address systems used for announcements and all amplification equipment used by musicians and others.
- All public address systems, except the limited use of bullhorns for small special events, should require a special permit.

- Larger and louder special events should be moved away from the West Mesa to other areas more internal to the Park.
- Site layouts or event outlines should show where loudspeakers are proposed to be placed with directionality clearly specified.
- Longer-term special events, such as the **Haunted Trail**, should be inspected frequently to control late-night rowdy behavior and vandalism rather than just once when they are set up.

C. EVENT PERMITTING

What kind of changes to special event permit applications, and the issuance and administration of permits would improve the event approval process and better mitigate negative impacts?

The Problem:

- The standard permit application is the same for all special events regardless of size and complexity.
- There is no planning for potential spillover of large special events onto neighboring private property.
- There are simply too many permits issued beyond the capacity of the Park to accommodate them all.
- Not enough planned amenities such as restrooms and trash receptacles are available.
- Security is absent or inadequate. **The Haunted Trail**, for example hires security personnel that ignore improper behavior and violate Park rules themselves by smoking on duty.
- There is an apparent lack of coordination between City departments.

Recommendations:

- Conduct a comprehensive review of the various categories of special events in the park.
- Conduct a comprehensive review of special events' impacts to adjacent communities, Institutions and other uses internal to the Park and general users of the Park.
- Limiting special events to non-profit rather than profit-making events should be considered. If they are, what criteria should be developed?
- Meaningful efforts should be made to require Parks & Rec staff and special event organizers to seriously consider and document consideration of alternative venues.
- Any new special events on the West Mesa should be seriously scrutinized as the area is currently at full capacity.
- For larger special events, enough time in the permitting process should be allowed to ensure that details are worked through and plans are thoroughly reviewed by responsible City Departments.
- The Balboa Park Committee, when reviewing applications, should review schematic drawings of layouts and insure a buffer zone between special events.

and neighboring property to assure adequate mitigation of decibel levels and sound equipment layout.

- Special event organizers should pay for street cleaning at the close of events. Clean up standards applicable to sidewalks and turf should also be considered, based on criteria to be determined.
- Special event organizers must be required to document mitigation efforts beyond limited current requirements to provide notice to Institutions in the Park.
- Special event organizers of a size to be determined must provide notice to adjacent West Mesa property owners.
- Random Inspections by Parks & Rec staff of fenced-in special events should be required to assure compliance with permit requirements.
 - This is particularly important with month-long events like the **Haunted Trail**.

D. LANDSCAPE IMPACTS:

Would changes to Park landscaping policies and practices reduce or mitigate negative impacts?

The Problem

- Turf does not have time to heal between special events.
- Large “semis” and other heavy trucks drive across and park on the lawns to make deliveries. This is exacerbated during the spring when rains may have softened the turf.
- Informal and semi-organized groups ignore signs to keep off water-saturated areas of the turf.
- Random thoughtless and malicious behavior causes damage to limbs and sensitive root structures of trees and shrubs.
 - Beer trucks are parked on lawns during the **Gay Pride Festival**.
 - Catering trucks are parked on lawns during the **Saint Patrick’s Day Parade**.

Recommendations

- Consideration should be given to establishing a policy regarding the scheduling frequency and/or duration of special events permitted in the same area of the lawn. The **Tour da Fat** and **Family Day** special events, for example, were scheduled on consecutive weekends. The Park horticulturist should recommend recovery times depending on the size and nature of the special event.
- Heavy equipment and mechanical carnival-type rides should not be allowed on the turf.
- Load In/Out should be required, whenever possible, directly from 6th Avenue or Balboa Drive to avoid driving on the turf.
- In general, Parks & Rec staff should be diligent in enforcement of existing rules and policies.

E. GOOD NEIGHBOR POLICY:

What kind of policies, guidelines and practice could improve the permitting and managing of special events and could mitigate negative impacts?

The Problem

- When there are permit violations the public has no designated Parks & Rec staff to complain to when there is a problem in real time.
- There is no requirement to provide notice of special events to community residents or property managers.
- There is no centralized contact procedure, such as a “hot line” to facilitate communication with Parks & Rec staff to report problems or successes.
- There are no contact procedures for real time reporting of problems to staff or event organizers during special events.

Recommendations

- On the Park’s web page, there should be a special event page that provides a detailed special event calendar, event layouts, road closure logistics such as detours, and emergency contact information.
- There should be a “hot line” for neighborhood residents to register complaints.
- Special event noticing should include adjacent business, community organizations and property managers.
- The Parks & Rec Department should hire a Park Ranger to enforce special event permits and penalties.
- Problematic events in the Park should be brought back to the Balboa Park Committee to discuss and document what went wrong and whether or not the special event will be allowed to return.
- Adverse special event impacts on both the Institutions and the community should be fully documented when they occur in order to assure a meaningful opportunity for recommending mitigation or elimination of negative impacts in the future.
- On-call Park Ranger, SDPD, and special event organizers’ contact information should be made available to designated local community representative so they can be reached during special events before they become larger problems.

F. SECURITY DEPOSITS

Are security deposits required? If so, are they adequate? If not, what should they be to appropriately mitigate adverse impacts?

The Problem

- Security Deposits are not required.

Recommendations

- Security Deposits should be required.

- Deposits should be calculated based on estimates of potential damage to the Park drawn from historical experience, and the projected number of special event attendees.

G. PENALTIES

Is there a system of fines or financial penalties for special event permit violations? If so, is the system adequate? If not, what should the system be?

The Problem

- There are only limited or no apparent consequences when a special event does not adhere to the location, other factors specified in its permit or damages to the Park.
- Parks & Rec staff should be empowered to shut down events that commit serious permit violations - with special emphases on health and safety concerns.
- Problematic special events don't seem to be barred from coming back the next year.
- Some special events do not pay fees on time and are neither penalized nor denied a permit for the following year as a consequence.
 - The **Healing Arts Festival** set up and operated two un-permitted music stages, and is being allowed to have future special events without consequences - despite being warned by Parks & Rec staff that they might not be allowed back in the Park.

Recommendations

- A schedule of fines or other financial penalties should be developed for permit violations, particularly those related to noise or physical damage that special events cause to the Park.

H. FULL COST RECOVERY:

Is the current method of calculating fees to charge special events for use of the Park adequate to arrive at a fair and reasonable process for the determination of full cost recovery?

The Problem

- Parks & Rec staff is limited to not charging more than allowed by the current cost schedule to provide services to support events.
- The Park is treated exactly the same way as the rest of the City's park system, in spite of the significant differences in multiple uses and negative impacts of special events.
- Fees do not take account of the lost opportunity cost of having public park lands unavailable to the general public.
- The current fee schedule not take into account the affect of cumulative impacts caused by numerous special events.
- Special events are in effect being subsidized by the City's general fund without compensating for negative impacts on the Park.

- Fees do not include the cost of extra maintenance required when an area of the Park cannot be irrigated and maintained over an extended period of time (up to seven days).

Recommendations

- The West Mesa area of the Park should be divided into sub-areas for the purposes of establishing user fees.
- Schedules of fees should take into account duration of the event.
- A substantially increased ground use fee schedule and reduced or eliminated discounts should be adopted that have a real relationship to the actual impact of special events on the Park.
- Consideration should be given to whether there should be an appropriate fee schedule for the Park separate from the rest of the City's park system.
- Calculation of special event fees should take into account lost revenue incurred by the Institutions in the Park if the Institutions can document lost revenues due to the impacts of special events.
- Cumulative impacts should be factored into the cost basis for fee schedules.
- Best practices from other urban parks such Central Park, Golden Gate Park, and others should be used as appropriate benchmarks to set special event fee levels.
- Lost opportunity costs of the Institutions should be taken into account in fee schedules to mitigate loss of free and open public access.

October 20, 2009