

RESOLUTION NO. 20211021-027

WHEREAS, creative activation of residential streets can help build community, increase safety, and improve quality of life; and

WHEREAS, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the need for outdoor public spaces where people can gather, socialize, exercise, and play in a safe, physically-distanced manner; and

WHEREAS, pilot programs and initiatives adopted during the pandemic that introduced innovative use of public space and right of way, such as the Healthy Streets Initiative that used “soft” closures to make streets safer for walking, biking, and rolling and the Shop The Block program that successfully promoted safe shopping and dining outdoors, are in the process of transitioning into permanent programs under direction from Council; and

WHEREAS, the Austin Transportation Department, in a September 30, 2021 Memo to Mayor and Council regarding Austin Strategic Mobility Plan (ASMP) Amendments, acknowledges the need for these spaces and proposes adding a policy to the ASMP that reads “Support streets as places where non-mobility community functions can take place; Recognize the diverse and expanding civic needs within our right of way and promote adaptive uses of the street”; and

WHEREAS, climate change and weather-related disasters such as Winter Storm Uri have emphasized the importance of community resilience and relationship-building activities in promoting greater resilience; and

WHEREAS, for National Preparedness Month in September 2021, the City of Austin Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management focused a week of their emergency preparedness campaign on “Know Your Neighbors” and encouraged Austinites to “know your community before an emergency or a disaster occurs”; and

WHEREAS, block parties and similar street activations are an excellent way to meet and connect with neighbors; and

WHEREAS, current City block party permit processes and regulations create formidable barriers and also raise serious equity concerns; and

WHEREAS, Section 14-8-32 of the City Code restricts block parties exclusively to streets abutting single family dwellings, which many families and individuals cannot afford to buy or rent; and

WHEREAS, racial disparities all-too-frequently mirror economic disparities, and therefore a City focused on remedying racial injustice should not restrict opportunities, privileges, or greater safety to those living in single-family dwellings; and

WHEREAS, Austinites nominated hundreds of streets in every corner of the city for the City's Healthy Streets Initiative but only a handful of staff-selected locations have been implemented, despite overwhelming support for the initiative; and

WHEREAS, other cities such as San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Seattle, Philadelphia, and London have offered their residents Play Streets programs to facilitate greater outdoor activity and community-building; and

WHEREAS, there are not currently any processes that allow for Austin residents to apply for a permit to create a Healthy Street or Play Street on their block; and

WHEREAS, a Resident-Led Healthy Streets Program and Play Street Program would, much like the installations of Green Streets, traffic circles, and street "mural" painting projects realized through the Neighborhood Partnering Program, empower neighborhoods to design and implement effective traffic mitigation devices for safer streets; and

WHEREAS, the Urban Transportation Commission, Pedestrian Advisory Council, Bicycle Advisory Council, three-dozen diverse community organizations, more than 100 businesses, and more than 850 individuals have expressed their

support for a City of Austin Living Streets program that includes better and easier block parties, Play Streets, and Resident-Led Healthy Streets; and

WHEREAS, Council enthusiastically embraces the Living Streets vision of a suite of street activations that are easily accessible to all Austinites for safe and joyful community-building in all neighborhoods and, as efficiently as possible, wishes to see the Neighborhood Block Party Program improved and a Play Streets Program and a Resident-Led Healthy Streets Program created, as detailed below; **NOW, THEREFORE**,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF AUSTIN:

Council intends to make block parties easier to organize and more equitably accessible to all residents and neighborhoods. Therefore, Council directs the City Manager to review the Neighborhood Block Party Program (the “Program”), evaluate how to implement the following three goals and their associated strategies, proceed with any of the listed changes that the Manager determines are feasible and can be made administratively, and return to Council by January 21, 2022, with drafts of any necessary code amendments or if any additional policy guidance is needed or any of the listed changes are deemed infeasible.

1. Reduce application barriers. When reviewing strategies to reduce application barriers, the Manager should consider:
 - a. Allowing a simple majority of residents along the proposed closure to approve a proposed block party of eight hours or less;
 - b. Allowing a two-thirds majority of residents along the proposed closure to approve a proposed block party of greater than eight hours;
 - c. Providing flexibility for alternative methods of neighbor notification of the proposed block party, such as the posting of signs or the distribution of door hangers, that can substitute for the current requirement to collect the signatures of 100% of the block’s residents;

- d. Fixing or replacing the map tool in the AMANDA-based Austin Build + Connect portal that an applicant is currently required to use to indicate the location of the proposed block party, or ensuring robust, user-friendly mapping functionality in any future online application system, should the Austin Build+Connect portal be replaced entirely;
 - e. Providing an alternative application process for anyone unable to complete an AMANDA-based application, including those with limited technology access or proficiency;
 - f. Providing all block party program information, application forms, and instructions in Spanish as well as English; and
 - g. Continuing to minimize block party permit fees and associated costs to the greatest extent possible and, if feasible, creating a block party permit fee waiver process.
2. Right-size safety obligations. When reviewing strategies to make sure safety precautions are proportionate, the Manager should consider:
- a. Continuing to require one unobstructed travel lane for emergency vehicle access, and working with the public safety departments to minimize the required width of that lane using a context-sensitive approach that considers factors such as whether the building heights on residential blocks necessitate the use of aerial ladders;
 - b. Allowing resident vehicles to remain parked on the street, as long as the emergency travel lane is maintained;
 - c. Not requiring monitors to be stationed at the mandatory street barricades; and
 - d. Ensuring the City continues to supply block party street barricades that are highly visible, reflective, and portable by individual block party organizers.

3. Make it inclusive and equitable. When reviewing strategies to ensure inclusivity and equity in the Program, the Manager should consider:
 - a. Allowing schools and places of worship to be present within a permitted block;
 - b. Developing a block party option for blocks that contain multifamily residential buildings and that are on local streets that can be closed without adversely impacting mobility or safety for the adjacent neighborhood street network, and adapting the application process, permit fees, emergency access requirements, and any other provisions for this option to the extent necessary to ensure equivalent public safety and community support for the event;
 - c. If feasible, developing a block party option for blocks that contain mixed-use and/or commercial properties and that are on local streets that can be closed without adversely impacting mobility or safety for the adjacent neighborhood street network, again adapting the programmatic provisions as necessary; and
 - d. Establishing additional sites for street barricade pick-up/drop-off at geographically dispersed City facilities, to improve equity in the accessibility of these barricades for all parts of town.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED:

Council does not intend for the above strategies to be considered an exhaustive list and supports the City Manager and staff in making additional changes to the Program that align with the goals expressed above. To that end, Council encourages the City Manager to work with past block party permit applicants, community-based organizations (CBOs) such as Walk Austin, relevant Boards and Commissions, and peer cities to identify any additional updates that could be made that support the goals expressed above.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED:

In addition to easier, more accessible, more equitable block parties, Council desires to make Play Streets and resident-led, one-block Healthy Streets available to Austinites as community-building street activations. Therefore, the Council directs the City Manager to evaluate what is necessary to create new Play Streets and Resident-Led Healthy Streets Programs (the “Street Programs”) as detailed below, proceed with creation and implementation to the extent the Manager determines it is feasible to do so, and return to Council by January 21, 2022, with drafts of any necessary code amendments or if any additional policy guidance is needed or any of the provisions below are deemed infeasible or require additional resources to implement. In developing the Street Programs, the City Manager shall consider:

1. Establishing that a Play Street is intended to be a recurring, complete street closure that may occur for several hours, multiple times per week;
2. Establishing that a Resident-Led Healthy Street is intended to be a one-block, on-going, partial street closure to through-traffic while maintaining access for residents and their guests, deliveries, and emergency access, similar to the City’s existing staff-led Healthy Streets;
3. Requiring sixty percent of residents along the proposed closure to support a Play Street or Resident-Led Healthy Street permit application;
4. Allowing a Play Street or Resident-Led Healthy Street permit to be valid for up to six months (renewable), as long as compliance with program requirements is maintained;
5. Establishing that documentation from sixty percent of residents along an approved Play Street or Resident-Led Healthy Street in support of removing the street activation shall be sufficient grounds to revoke the permit and establish a “cooling-off” period of six months during which the same type of permit shall not be approved for the same location;

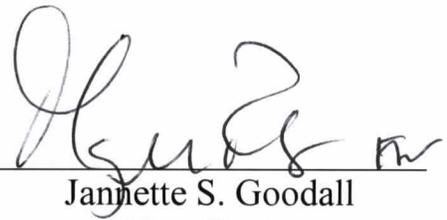
6. Striving to design the programs and permit processes to be as straightforward, easy, accessible, affordable, inclusive, and equitable as possible while ensuring sufficient public safety and community awareness and support;
7. Seeking input from CBOs such as Walk Austin, relevant Boards and Commissions, and peer cities on program design; and
8. Adopting all feasible options for street barricades that could reduce program costs while maintaining street safety, such as planter boxes.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED:

Council directs the City Manager to create a single, public-facing webpage where residents can find a menu of Living Streets activations that may be available to them in their neighborhood and connects them to the Neighborhood Block Party, Play Streets, and Resident-Led Healthy Streets programs. This Living Streets webpage should be made publicly available in time to support the launching of the Street Programs.

ADOPTED: October 21, 2021

ATTEST:



Jannette S. Goodall
City Clerk