

Block Party

Festival Planning and Ideas Toolkit

So you are going to host or join a block party... Congratulations!

You don't have to live on a block of single family homes to hold a block party; people in apartments and condos have them too!

This tool kit offers tips and suggestions on how to make your party a smooth running success. You may decide to simply close your street to traffic and sip lemonade in the sun, or you may want to hold a parade, dance lessons and a fashion show...from the most simple to the most elaborate, it's your call!

Details you should discuss ahead of time:

Setting the stage for success

Planning ahead and getting others to share in the work are the keys to a successful party.

- Gather as many neighbours as possible and divide up the tasks: advertising, setup, helping out the elderly and/or disabled, coordinating food, security, dealing with vehicles, clean up, removal of barricades and furniture. Make a list of all the things that need to be done and have people sign on.
- Include everybody in the planning! Children, seniors, members of minority groups, people who speak different languages, people with disabilities, neighbourhood churches and so on. By far the best way to get people involved is to ask them directly.
- Decide on a possible theme for the block party.
- Think of an alternate plan in case of poor weather. You might want to track down some folding tents – perhaps from a local organisation or school – just in case you want to hold some activities under shelter. Tarps and ropes can also help.
- Draw a map of the street so you can decide where activities will be organized.
- Decide if your party will be for neighbours only, or open to friends and relatives. If yes, how many can each neighbour invite? Make this clear in your flyer/invitation.
- Invite everyone to the day's festivities and get them excited about the day. This is separate from getting their approval to close the street to traffic for the day – the city requires this well in advance. You must notify everyone on your block of the street closure, as well as those living kitty-corner to your block – across the adjoining cross streets.
 - Consider using chalk messages on the sidewalk to advertise features of the day.
 - Reach out to people who speak other languages on your street: can someone translate your invitations?
 - Consider using leaflets, posters, newsletters, etc. to spread the word.

- Go door to door – bring the kids along to meet their neighbours if they don't already know them.
- Tell people what to bring in the invitation (i.e. chairs, food, cutlery – try and avoid disposables to reduce waste).
- Think about getting people together from the block (especially the kids) to help make signs for your block party. Again, a theme can help make this more fun!

Getting City of Vancouver permit and barricades:

Apply for your free City of Vancouver permit at least two weeks before your party date at <https://vancouver.ca/doing-business/block-parties.aspx>. This site also tells you where you can rent barricades. The barricades are plastic so maybe only 15 pounds each. Each barricade breaks down into 2 flat triangle ends and 1 long eight foot by six inch piece.

When to set things up? How long should it go?

- The city recommends the afternoon and early evening as the best time to run a block party, but let your energy and creativity be your guide! The street must be open to traffic before 10 a.m. and after 9 p.m., but you can, of course, start earlier or end later on your own or your neighbour's properties.
- Be sure to put out recycling, composting and garbage containers to make your clean up easier at the end of the day.

Being safe and respecting your neighbours.

Here are some key requirements laid out by the city for all block parties:

- Alcohol is not permitted on public property.
- Fireworks are not permitted at block parties.
- Access must be maintained for emergency vehicles.
- Barricades and all structures, tables, etc. must be easily removable
- Loud amplification of music is prohibited.
- Block parties must take place between 10 am and 9 pm. If you are starting the party before 10 am or continuing after 9 pm on your own property, please be respectful of neighbours and keep noise levels down.

Friendly cyclists: how to keep them that way.

These parties are meant to celebrate car free culture, and that includes bikes! Your street may even be part of the city wide cycling network. Please be considerate of cyclists, while encouraging them to be safe and slow around your event.

- Consider using welcome signs and an invitation to slow down. Use furniture in the street to block out rooms to create a sense of social space and encourage riders to slow and check things out.

- You might want to chalk out a bike route through your party, or think of some other way to guide cyclists through your event at a slow speed.

Where to put those cars on a car-free day.

- Identify locations where you can move cars well in advance. Off street and in alleys is best. Find out if anyone on your street is going to be away on your block party date and ask if you can use their driveway. Consider drawing a map to indicate available locations, and make it available to people who need it.
- Consider putting up homemade no parking notices for the day along the street, leaving notes on car windshields, flyers in doors, etc.

A day to remember...

This is your party – make it memorable so people want to come back next year. Here are some ideas to help get your creative juices flowing.

Introductions and icebreakers

- If a lot of people on your block don't know each other, consider using name tags so that people have an easier time with names.
- Make sure you welcome people you don't know or don't see very often.
- To help with staying in touch over the rest of the year, consider circulating a sign-up sheet where people can leave their name, street address, telephone number and email address. If everyone is comfortable with the idea, photocopy this so that all households on the block get a copy.

Music

- You will be surprised how many of your neighbours have musical talent; from classical music to traditional folk music from the old country, it's probably just waiting to be unleashed. Be sure to ask when you start planning the party and with luck you may find yourself organising a series of concerts throughout the afternoon
- A little amplification goes a long way – in fact, the city asks that you avoid loud amplification.

Food

- And lots of it. Baked goods, fruit salads, appetizers, main courses, dessert...
- Bring those barbeques right out into the street

Activities

- Dance lessons
- Badminton
- Sunrise yoga sessions
- Lantern making and procession
- Juggling, magic, hoola-hoops

- Star gazing
- Block long garage sale
- Street clean up – consider renting a truck if a number of people have large items such as old appliances which they need to take to the recycling depot or waste transfer station.
- Help a neighbour. Is one of your neighbours in need of some extra help in the garden or around the yard? This may be a good day for a number of people to pitch in and help out.
- Movie night in the street (a good sound system is key, though a sheet will do for projecting the image) – encourage the kids to get into their pyjamas.
- Make lawn signs, street-spanning banners, sculptures or public art to decorate the neighbourhood
- Provide an ample supply of hula hoops and skipping ropes.
- Gardening demos by local master gardeners.
- Bicycle maintenance workshop
- Local history talks by resident historians
- Language lessons by native non-English speakers
- Invite local arts, dance or martial arts groups to perform
- What about having a special dog party inside someone's fenced yard? This may be especially important if your block has lots of dogs who are fond of the offerings at open air pot luck events.
- Salons
 - Consider scheduling discussion groups over the course of the day: how to address neighbourhood homelessness, developing a traffic reduction plan for your block, reducing your block's carbon emissions, reintroducing native plant habitat on the block, etc.
- Guest speakers
 - Community activists
 - Parks board and school board trustees
 - City, provincial or federal politicians
 - Neighbourhood police and fire liaison officers
 - Lost stream expert
 - A representative from the Cooperative Auto Network and/or the Jack Bell Vanpool Society to talk about their programs and services

Atmosphere

- Bring furniture outside
- Potted plants need to celebrate in the street too
- A nice Persian carpet can really accent the late afternoon sheen in the asphalt
- Define distinct rooms on the road with all of the above: a discussion salon here, a dining room there, a concert hall there, an arts and crafts rumpus room further along.

Stuff for Kids (of all ages)

- Bicycle parade – after everyone first decorates their bicycle, of course
- Giant checkers and chess on the road
- Street hockey and soccer
- A dog show
- Puppet making/puppet show
- Bake sale
- Hopscotch
- Lemonade stand(s)
- Giant road murals of water colour paints or chalk
- Stenciling salmon next to storm sewer grates.

After the party...

Cleanup

- Be sure to put out recycling, composting and garbage containers at the start to make clean up easier.
- Encourage everyone in the invitation to bring and use permanent plates, cutlery, cups etc. This will reduce your waste considerably.
- Keep track of that volunteer sign-up sheet you created during the planning phase – if anyone is left cleaning up alone, they may not want to be involved next year.

Communication over the year

A block party is just the start! How can you keep the momentum going? Discussion groups, newsletters, potlucks... the opportunities are endless. Maybe you will decide to organise a walking school bus for neighbourhood kids, organise a babysitting co-op or block watch group, install a public bench, or apply to the city for some traffic calming features on your street to keep that block party feeling going year round.