

Managing Special Events

Many municipalities host at least one special event each year and others are discovering that such events are an excellent way to promote community spirit. Generally, a special event is defined as any organized assembly or activity conducted by an individual or organization for a common purpose. Special events include parades, circuses, fairs, concerts, and sporting events, such as marathons, bicycle tours, and youth football or baseball games. Even if an event is not organized by a town, the municipality may have responsibilities if the event involves the use of public facilities such as parks or fire stations, or public services such as law enforcement or trash pick-up.



Controlling exposures from special events requires the participation and consideration of several different departments. For example, the police chief may develop a traffic control plan focused on keeping traffic moving into and around the event, but may not take into consideration the access needs of larger fire and EMS vehicles. Ambulances and fire apparatus will also need to be able to quickly exit the event area.

Attention to the following areas can minimize the risks and hazards of special events:

BUILDING AND FACILITIES

Inspect all permanent structures such as bleachers, grandstands or stages. Ensure the proper permits are filed for temporary structures that will be erected. Also inspect the walkways and parking lots that will be used for the event. Inspect athletic fields with the event organizer. All inspections should be well documented.

Supplemental lighting may be needed for night events. Sanitary concerns will be a significant consideration for large crowds and if food will be served. Portable toilets may be necessary. Health departments generally recommend one toilet for every 250 people, based on a maximum expected attendance.

FIRE & LIFE SAFETY

The fire inspector should review the projected occupancy of all enclosures, use of tents or other temporary structures. Fire permits may be needed for the handling of vehicle fuel, cooking facilities and use of an open flame or fireworks. All electrical wiring installed for the event should also be inspected.

Include the local fire and first aid departments in planning. The event may require additional first aid and fire crews to handle the excess call volume that can be expected. Standby crews may need to be scheduled to monitor specific operations, such as fireworks. Mutual aid from neighboring towns should be considered.

LAW ENFORCEMENT AND SAFETY

Make sure there are enough police officers, lifeguards and other emergency personnel are assigned to the event to ensure the safety of all participants, while still maintaining routine services to the community. If private groups will employ off-duty police officers, have a policy which addresses this practice.

TRAFFIC CONTROL

Map out parking areas and travel routes to and from an event site to avoid traffic problems, both for event attendees and non-participants who must travel through the area. Coordinate with local Traffic Safety Officers for the placement of barriers, cones and warning signs. The Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices provides guidance on traffic control for special events.

It is especially important to keep emergency routes open for ambulances, fire trucks and other emergency vehicles. You may not want to hold a specific event in a place that is normally over-crowded, such as on a beach during a holiday weekend.

FOOD AND BEVERAGES

If food will be served or sold at the event, verify food handling, preparation, and distribution complies with county health department food safety guidelines. Coordinate with the local health department to schedule inspections.

If alcohol is served, take steps to control its distribution and consumption. The availability of alcohol may necessitate additional law enforcement or emergency medical personnel. Including alcohol as a part of a special event requires close communications with your risk manager.

CLEAN UP PLAN

Groups using public facilities should have a plan for cleaning up equipment, premises or streets after an event. They should be notified in writing that if they do not clean up satisfactorily or if they damage public property, they will be financially responsible for cleanups or repairs.

SPECIAL EVENTS / FACILITY USE PERMITS

Public entities should require that all groups complete an application for a special event. Designate a staff person to administer the Special Event / Facility Use Permit process. There should be an appeals process available to applicants. The decisions of the person reviewing the appeal should be final.

Municipalities should have a Special Event Planning Organization that meets to plan and discuss every event. Some events will be simple and routine. Other events will be complicated and require careful planning. The Permit Administrator should coordinate the event requirements with other departments as needed, e.g. police, fire department, first aid unit, parks, roads, etc. The Incident Command System provides a useful framework for the Special Event Planning Organization.

INSURANCE & LIABILITY CONCERNS

Consult with Risk Management Consultants regarding insurance requirements and options. The municipal and Joint Insurance Fund attorneys should be consulted for new or unusual situations. Some issues to consider discussing with Risk Managers and Solicitors include:

- Facility Use Agreements
- Hold Harmless and Indemnification Agreements
- Individual Participant Forms
- Minimum levels of insurance coverage
- Specific notices to MEL for fireworks and amusement rides, including inflatables.

Special events have many benefits to the municipality and its residents. They also present many challenges to the community. Overcoming these challenges starts with a good plan and organization. Involve all stakeholders early to minimize surprises. Your Joint Insurance Fund Administration, Safety Director, and Risk Manager are ready to help.
