

By Emily Zebel, PA Downtown Center

# Hosting Events in Your Community

## From Concept to Completion

Planning an event seems like a simple enough concept. Start with an idea, hire some talent, put out a little publicity and - voila' - you have an event. For any of you who have put on a special event, however, you already know that it is never that simple. The fundamentals of planning an event are the same whether 500, 5,000, or 50,000 people attend. It boils down to: Where and when do you start? Who does what? How long will it take? As we approach the holiday season and downtowns and core commercial districts ready themselves for festive activities, retail promotions, and cheerful events, it's a great time to evaluate what your community offers and what might be missing to bring more seasonal vibrancy to your community.

### Where to Start

Begin with a goal, an objective. Why are you having the event? Who do you want to attend? Your primary objective may be to get people to visit your community so you can demonstrate that it is a great place to live, work, and play. A secondary objective might be to reinforce downtown's positive image with current residents and business owners. A third objective could be to raise money. And, finally, remember to have fun!

When deciding on an event, do your homework. See what other, similar communities have done successfully. Look at your competition: is a nearby town putting on a similar or competitive event at the same time? Look at your own community: what can it support? Be honest with yourself; don't plan something so grandiose that it fails. You'll lose credibility — and money — and you may find it more difficult to produce future events. Last, but

not least, what resources — volunteers, paid staff, municipal services, etc. — are available? Then, be creative. What kind of event would work in your community?

Remember — any event that's worth hosting should be a unique expression of your neighborhood or downtown. It should have a long-term impact, not just serve as a quick dose of entertainment.

### When to Start

Ideally, you should start planning your event a year in advance. This allows you to solicit sponsors in a timely fashion, develop a strong volunteer organization, and plan for success. Once you have an idea/plan/strategy in place, your next step should be funding, whether it be through sponsorships, fund raising, grants, donations, or municipal budget allocations. When soliciting sponsors, be sensitive to their budget years. Get to them before they start their budget planning process, so you will be included in next year's allocations. One of the biggest mistakes budget organizers consistently make is to wait until the last minute before they begin contacting sponsors. The reality? The shorter the lead time you give sponsors, the less money you will raise; conversely, the longer the lead the time, the more sponsorships you will generate for your event.

Also begin selecting your talent, soliciting food vendors and crafters, and recruiting volunteers. If you plan to have talent at your festivity — singers, dancers, bands, clowns, performers of any type — book them early, at least six to nine months before the event.



Where do you find talent? Call your local arts organization, high school band directors and music teachers, local clubs and theaters, local organizations (such as Kiwanis, Chamber of Commerce, Optimists, etc.), and fellow Main Street managers. When booking talent, take the composition of the audience into consideration. Is the event aimed at families? Seniors? Boomers? Gen-X? The talent mix will be different for each of these demographic markets.

If you plan to book food vendors and/or crafters, prepare your mailing list at least nine months before the event. For food vendors, always approach your local restaurants, delis, and diners first. Remember, your job is to serve the local community and help those businesses.

When recruiting volunteers, look first at the service clubs within the community as well as church and civic groups. If you are working with a charitable organization, such as the United Way, the local hospital auxiliary, Rotary, or Kiwanis, ask their members to volunteer. This is a particularly viable option if those organizations piggyback onto your event for their own fund raising such as selling T-shirts, hot dogs, raffle tickets, etc. Develop a volunteer workbook that carefully details the various volunteers needed and their responsibilities. Don't overload your volunteers. It is

better to have more people, with each person doing one small task, than too few people who end up being overwhelmed by multiple responsibilities. The latter scenario leads to burnout and loss of good volunteers.

## **Timing (and Management!) are Everything**

Putting together a successful event requires that someone be in charge of each of the following areas. Within each of these categories are subcategories of function and responsibility. Note, too, that many of the functions overlap; for instance, sponsorship can be handled by the event manager, the marketing person, or by someone designated solely to sell sponsorships.

### **EVENT MANAGEMENT.**

The person responsible for the overall management of the event is the event manager. This individual is involved in event strategies, site negotiations, volunteer coordination, marketing strategies, development of the timeline, pre-event site surveys, talent selection, and oversight of the day-to-day operation of the event staff.

continued on page 50

## CONSERVATION & RECREATION

continued from page 49

### **VOLUNTEER COORDINATION.**

The volunteer coordinator is responsible for ensuring that there are enough people to make the event function efficiently. Many volunteers can be drawn from the community at large, through service organizations, churches, local charity groups, residents, and the business community.

### **MARKETING.**

The individual handling marketing is in charge of advertising and public relations, graphic design, production of collateral material (brochures, posters, flyers, bag stuffers, payroll and billing inserts, etc.) sponsorship sales, exhibit space sales, program book sales, and development of cross-marketing relationships (with other community groups or with multiple sponsors). This person is also responsible for generating sponsorship dollars to support the event and for helping to ensure that enough funds are raised to make the event successful.

### **FINANCE.**

The finance person's job is to establish a system that effectively controls expenditures, as well as ensuring that income exceeds expenses. A simple numbered purchase order system, with two signatures for approval on orders and a two-signature check payout system, offer an effective way to keep an accurate accounting of expenses

and revenues. With the general availability of computer spreadsheet programs, the finance person should be able to update income and expenses on a weekly basis. As in any business venture, keeping close watch on the cash flow allows the management team to adjust the budget to accurately reflect changes in income and/or expenses.

### **LEGAL.**

Whenever you negotiate a relationship – with sponsors, venues, teams, entertainers, or other organizations — you need a contract prepared by a lawyer. A contract ensures that all major commitments are clearly defined and leaves no room for future misunderstandings. It should clearly define areas of responsibility, limitations, confidentiality or nondisclosure, indemnification, individual rights, and recommendations for an equitable resolution if a dispute arises.

### **INSURANCE.**

Just as you need legal safeguards, you also need insurance protection. Insurance can protect you against greed, weather, accidents, violence, and human error. The types of insurance most commonly used for special events include comprehensive, general liability, errors and omissions, accident, cancellation, spectator/participant, workman's compensation, and weather. Several major insurance companies specialize in event insurance and can be contacted through your local insurance agent. Event insurance is usually expensive, but when the alternative is considered, it is quickly seen as an essential investment.

Try to get your community to add your event to its insurance. It will save you a lot of money, and the cost is minimal compared to your having to purchase an extensive policy.

After it's all over, be sure and have a quick de-briefing meeting with everyone involved in creating the event. Write down people's impressions of how it went. Take notes on the things that worked and the things that didn't work. Thank your volunteers profusely both



publicly at the event and one-on-one afterwards. No volunteers mean no event. They are your most valuable resource. Congratulate yourselves for a job well done and polish the rough spots moving forward!

Events in our core communities are not solely for the positive impact they have on the local economy – remember the good you’re doing for your community from an emotional side as well. This is where people go for social connection, and events can help instill a sentimental attachment to being downtown. The impact of increased commercial activity is a bonus, but there’s really no monetary value that can be placed on that special “sparkle” and feeling of inner warmth that a town creates during a holiday event! **B**



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily’s passion for storytelling, healthy communities and nature-based placemaking inspires her role at PDC, where she supports the organization’s marketing, communications, and membership. She also works as freelance designer, photographer and videographer and has received numerous awards including selections in the No Man’s Land Film Festival, Filmed by Bike Oregon, and S.O.F.A. Film Festival. She resides in Dauphin, PA, where she can be found working on her next oil painting, exploring the nearby rivers and trails with her young daughter, Willow, or training for her next ultramarathon.

## Grow Your Professional Arborist Skills

JOIN PENN STATE EXTENSION EXPERTS TO INCREASE YOUR PROFESSIONAL TREE CARE SKILLS AND EARN ISA CEUS

**CHOOSE FROM IN-PERSON OR ONLINE OPTIONS.**

#### Arborist Short Course In-Person Workshops

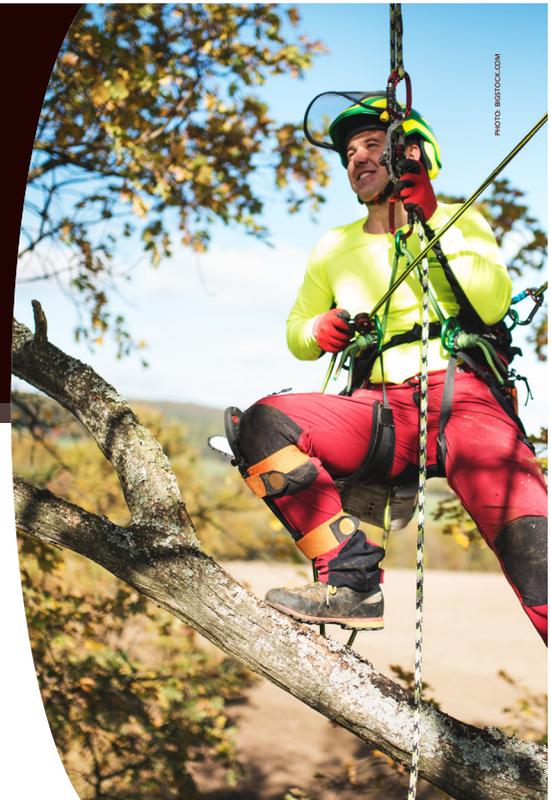
Mercer, PA: Begins January 17  
Leesport, PA: Begins March 14

#### Arborist Short Course Webinar Series

Online series begins January 10, 2023

Learn more and register today!

[extension.psu.edu/arborist-course](https://extension.psu.edu/arborist-course) or call 877-345-0691



PennState Extension

Penn State is an equal opportunity, affirmative action employer, and is committed to providing employment opportunities to all qualified applicants without regard to race, color, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, disability, or protected veteran status.

Code 6247 | U.Ed. AGR 22-77