



January 31, 2008

Seattle's Special Events Permitting Process: Successes and Opportunities



WaMu Family 4th, Gas Works Park, July 4, 2007
Source: One Reel

Why We Did This Audit

In Summer 2006, bad feelings arose between the Seattle Art Museum and Seattle Hempfest organizers regarding the annual Hempfest event held at Myrtle Edwards Park since 1995; both groups blamed each other and the City's special events permitting process. Hence, several City Councilmembers requested a performance audit of the special events permitting process to assess whether: (1) staffing levels are adequate

to review permit applications; (2) follow-up (lessons learned) after the event takes place; and (3) the Special Event Permit process is working to mitigate the impacts of an event and to notify neighborhoods about a special event.

Background

The City of Seattle has played an important role in actively supporting the neighborhoods and community groups that organize special events, which range from street fairs and festivals to concerts and sporting events, serving to bring together celebrants with diverse interests and backgrounds. These events range from 50 or more people to the more than 250,000 participants who celebrate the citywide, three-day Seafair event.

Special Event Permits are required for events where it is reasonably expected that 50 or more people will gather and is reasonably expected to require the provision of substantial public services. These events are likely to require coordinated City services and have a substantial impact on the park or public space; require considerable advance planning by more than one governmental agency, in order to adequately protect public safety and property and to reduce adverse impacts on the public place and upon neighbors and other users of our public places. The citywide special events permitting function is currently staffed by a half-time Special Events Coordinator and a full-time administrative support person.

Conclusions

The 2006 Hempfest–Seattle Art Museum controversy was an exception and not indicative of widespread problems with the City's special events permitting process. The



Four hydros racing at Seafair.
Source: Seafair Archives

Special Events Committee has a successful track record in meeting its mission and is managed effectively and efficiently. Committee members have substantial experience working with event organizers and benefit from strong leadership from the coordinator. Our Web survey results indicated that almost all the permit applicants responding were satisfied or very satisfied with the Special Event Permit application and review process.

The current Special Events Coordinator is well respected by Committee members and permit applicants, particularly for her effectiveness and responsiveness in organizing a large number of complex events involving diverse interest groups. Special Events Committee members and other agencies interviewed during the audit expressed concerns about the absence of succession planning to ensure that citywide special events continued to be effectively coordinated when the Special Events Coordinator retires.

Overall, the permit application process is efficient, but the moderate permit fees do not cover the cost of City services, particularly the extensive police and transportation services required for special events.

The permit process can be very imposing for applicants and challenging for City agencies

that are required to plan and provide services for special events with constrained resources. Permit applicants who responded to the Special Events Web survey indicated that accessing information about permit requirements, fees, application forms, and City contacts was challenging because the City does not have a dedicated Web site for Special Event Permits. The City's search engine offers prospective permit applicants links to the Seattle Fire Department, the Department of Transportation and the Park Department Scheduling Office, but no immediate access to the Special Events Office. (One confused applicant who was directed to the Parks Department Scheduling Office mistakenly thought the application process was complete after filling out a *Special Parks Permit Use Application* rather than a *Special Event Permit Application*.) In addition, these other City Web sites did not have active links to the Special Events Office, and only one offered contact information for the Special Events Office.



Fremont Solstice Parade
Source: Seattle Municipal Archives Photograph Collection 115134

Many permit applicants expressed interested in an online, interactive application process to expedite the special event and other permits required for a single event. For example, the permits and licenses required for a major festival or marathon can include:

- Special Event Permits from the City Special Events Office;

- Street Use Permits from the Seattle Department of Transportation;
- Trade show or business licenses from the City’s Revenue and Consumer Affairs Division for vendors selling food, books, equipment, or services;
- Temporary Food Service Permits from the Seattle-King County Department of Public Health for food vendors;
- Noise and temporary structure permits from the Department of Planning and Development if music and seating (scaffolding) is offered on site; and
- Special occasion licenses from the Washington State Liquor Control Board for beer gardens.



First-time permit applicants were confused and sometimes intimidated by the City’s Special Event Permit application process. For example, the experience of presenting proposed applications and describing the planned event to the 10-plus members of the Special Events Committee was intimidating for first-time applicants. Applicants were also expected to deal with issues of security, finance, health, insurance, etc. In addition, the Special Events Committee provided input and established permit conditions during the presentations that were not always understood by the applicants

until the actual permit was received approximately one-week before the event date. Even though the City representatives were generally considered professional and “friendly,” the process could still be intimidating.

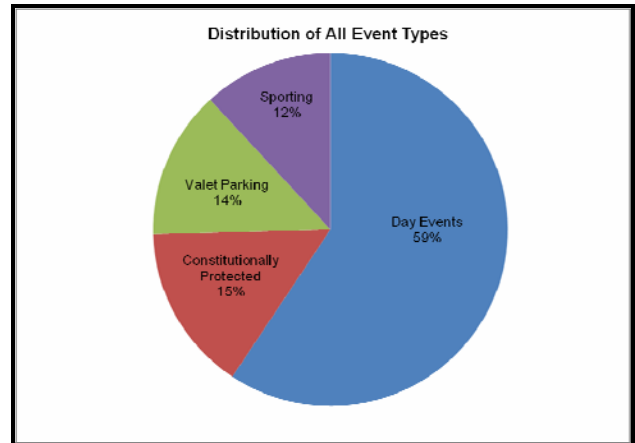
Sufficient notification of neighborhoods in advance of planned events was also identified as an area needing improvement. Department of Neighborhoods (DON) Neighborhood Coordinators receive notice of Special Event Permit applications only days before the Committee reviews the permit applications. This short notice does not allow Neighborhood Coordinators to obtain neighborhood concerns about the event applications and relay them to DON’s Committee representative before the permit application is considered.

Current City policy fosters a favorable special events environment through moderate permits fees and proactive assistance to event sponsors in planning events. However, some Special Events Committee members expressed concerns about applicants’ lack of compliance with permit requirements, application deadlines, and payment of permit fees, as well as non compliance with specific permit conditions established by agencies to maintain public health and safety during events. Violations included non-payment of permit or license fees, failure to obtain permits, and non-compliance with specified event times, designated routes, and fire permit requirements. Citywide policy, or case-by-case sanctions or penalties had not been developed by all the agencies involved in the permit process to reduce the recurring violations, or prevent permit applicants with a history of recurring violations from obtaining new permits. Those agencies that provide extensive services during special events are particularly cognizant of the City’s need to enforce permit and fee requirements so adequate time and resources are available to support event organizers and communities impacted by events.



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Rally and March
 Source: Seattle Municipal Archives Photograph
 Collection 137071

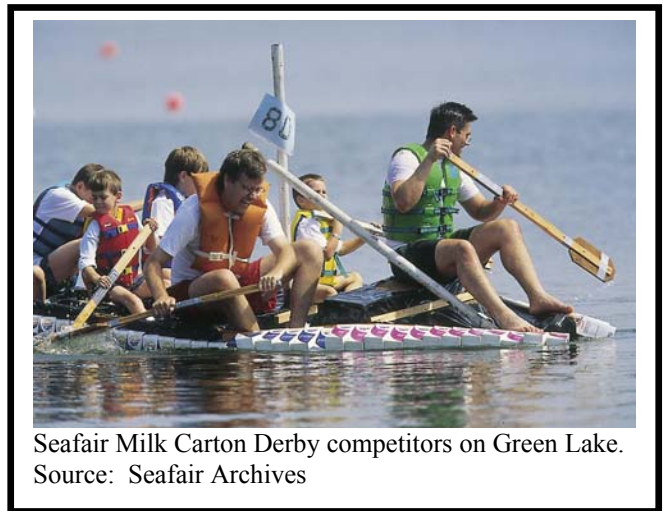
The chart below shows the distribution of 2006 special event permits by event types



Recommendations

While the special events permitting process is overall well-managed, the following recommendations could improve the program:

- *Develop a dedicated special events Web site with comprehensive information about the permit process and potential fees, and direct access to the Special Events Office.*
- *Design an interactive application process with the necessary links to other agencies that require related permits or licenses.*
- *Establish a voluntary new permit orientation and assistance program for first-time permit applicants.*
- *Develop a succession plan for the Special Events Coordinator to ensure continued leadership and efficient coordination of events.*
- *Post schedules for approved events online so the Department of Neighborhoods and interested citizens have sufficient notification.*
- *“Enforce” permit deadlines and payment of permit fees so the City has adequate preparation time and resources for special events, and ensure compliance with established permit conditions.*



Seafair Milk Carton Derby competitors on Green Lake.
 Source: Seafair Archives

A copy of the Office of City Auditor’s full report can be obtained at the office Web site at <http://seattle.gov/audit> or by calling (206) 233-3801. Please direct any questions or comments regarding this report, or suggestions for future audits, to Susan Cohen, Seattle City Auditor, at (206) 233-3801 or susan.cohen@seattle.gov