

PLAY STREETS PROGRAM

BRIEFING REPORT



D1

PLAY STREETS PROGRAM

BRIEFING REPORT

The Play Streets program was launched as a pilot in May 2014 and has since rapidly expanded across the city. Since that time, over 240 interested neighbors have applied for and held a play street event on their street to enliven their neighborhood streets with safe, active play.

Due to the growth and sustained interest in play streets, Seattle's Department of Transportation is formalizing the program in 2016.

This document highlights findings from the pilot and outlines steps needed to establish an ongoing play streets program.



CREDIT: HOST TOVA WREN

Play Streets Goals

Seattle's Play Streets Program is guided by the following objectives:

- 1/ Encourage use of neighborhood streets for safe, active play
- 2/ Promote social interaction between neighbors of all ages
- 3/ Provide additional usable public space in areas where parks or private yards are limited
- 4/ Maintain local and emergency access into and out of the block during events

Public Space Management

Play streets were developed as an element of SDOT's Public Space Management Program. The public right-of-way, which includes streets, sidewalks, and street trees, makes up 27% of Seattle's land, providing many opportunities to expand and activate public spaces. The Public Space Management Program supports creative improvements in our streets and sidewalks and makes it easier for community groups and businesses to enliven the city's public spaces.

The program is driven by four goals that help us promote and regulate a vibrant, safe, accessible, and attractive shared right-of-way:

ENCOURAGE: Promote the activation of public space

IMPLEMENT: Ensure that opportunities to activate the right-of-way are not missed due to perceived obstacles or implementation hurdles

INNOVATE: Identify opportunities for activation

REGULATE: Manage our public spaces in a transparent and predictable way

Program Timeline



Recommended Next Steps

1/ Formalize play streets program

After two years of successful performance and growth, we recommend approval of an ongoing play streets program. This will provide stability for hosts and neighbors while allowing SDOT to focus on long-term program success.

2/ Approve code amendment

To clear up potential confusion between code sections, we recommend that City Council approve a minor code amendment.

3/ Conduct community and media outreach

The Play Streets Program has seen widespread participation across the city. From our research, Seattle already issues the most play street permits per year of any contemporary city. SDOT should continue to share information about the program to further program awareness.

4/ Host play street events in underrepresented neighborhoods

While play streets have been hosted in every district of the city, some neighborhoods are underrepresented. From our observations, play street applications tend to cluster based on word-of-mouth or direct participation. SDOT should host a series of play street events to prime future applications in these neighborhoods.

5/ Continue program monitoring and evaluation

Like all of our Public Space Management programs, play streets was carefully developed to encourage participation and maximize the benefit to the right-of-way while continuing to maintain mobility and safety. Part of this process is conducting consistent evaluation of program performance, which we will continue to track as the program matures.

D1
History

Play in the right-of-way was identified as a priority program in the initial work plan for Public Space Management. To develop our Play Streets Program we relied on best-practice research of other play street programs and Seattle’s own experience with street closures.

We chose to match the pilot regulations for play streets closely to those of our existing block party permit. Our initial set of rules allowed for a wide range of dates, times, and activities so that we could assess which arrangements worked best.

Between May 2014 and Jan 2016, SDOT issued 185 play street permits. As seen in Chart 1, there was steady participation in the program through its initial year. After the pilot was extended, we saw a remarkable spike in applications during the summer of 2015.

Based on the continued growth in applications and the stated intent of previous hosts to reapply, we expect a sustained interest for a permanent play streets program into 2016 and beyond.

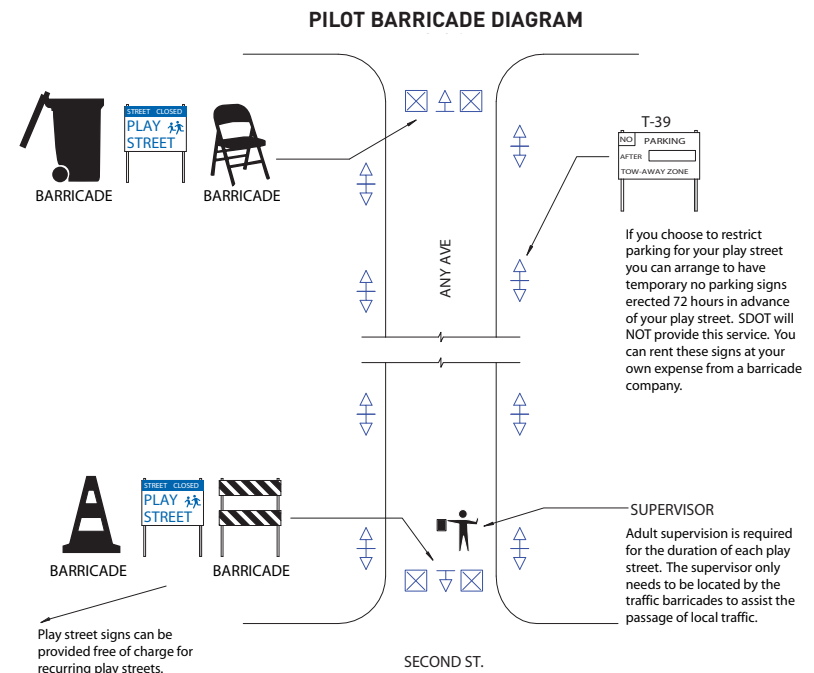
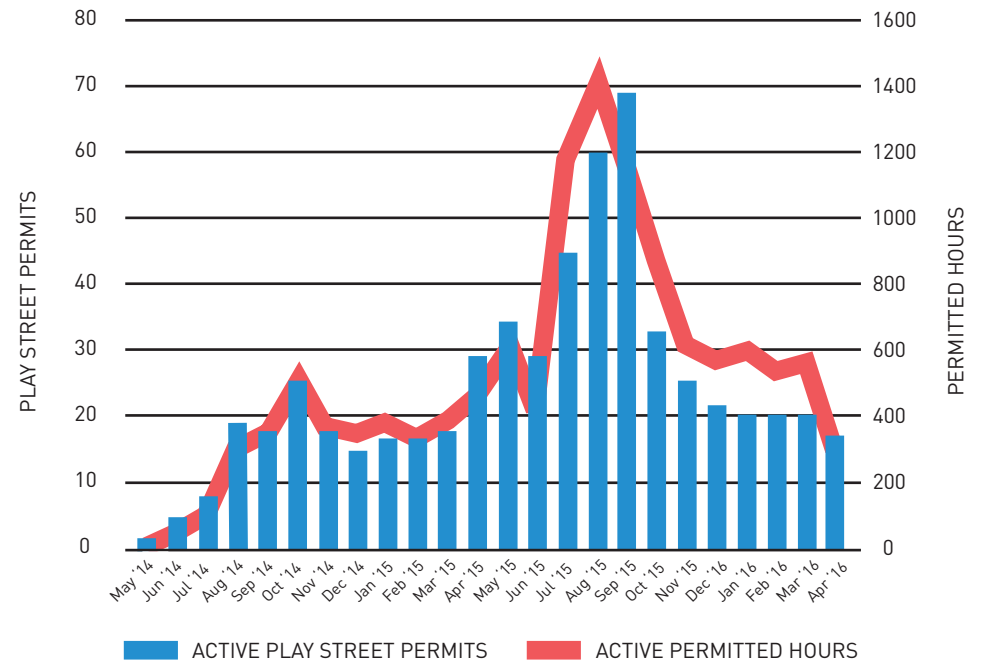
Program Basics

Since 2008, SDOT has issued block party permits at no cost to strengthen neighborhood spirit and support increased pedestrian use of the right-of-way. To allow for easy participation and a wide variety of location, we kept play street applications free and simple, as well. Interested hosts need to complete a basic application about which block they wanted to close and for how long.

Applicants are required to notify their neighbors about their plans prior to applying to make sure that there aren’t potential conflicts and to promote participation.

During play street events, hosts need to block their street with household objects, trash cans, or rented barricades. To allow for local and emergency access, adults are posted at each end of the block to move barricades as needed. They can also provide information to neighbors and passers-by.

CHART 1: PERMIT GROWTH



Relation to Block Parties

While developing the program, we were cautious about a potential substitution effect given the similarities between our existing block party permit and the new play streets program. Both permits allow neighbors to temporarily close their street to through traffic, but at different scales of activity and attendance.

Despite the similarity to block parties, we found that play streets are fulfilling a distinct interest for those who'd like to close their block. The lower graph shows annual application rates for both programs.

In the 2010-2015 period, block party applications grew by roughly 8.4% per year. The 185 play street applications we received were in addition to, rather than substituting for, block parties.

This finding matches conversations with hosts that the play street program is perceived as distinct from block parties in scale and purpose.

Participation and RSJI

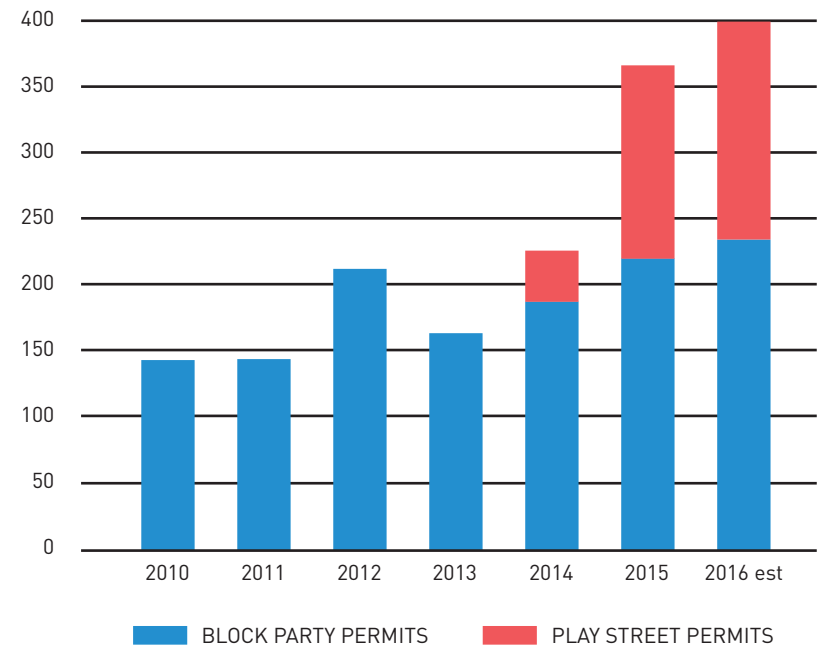
As an applicant-driven program, the location of play streets were determined by neighbor interest and awareness. In general, play streets were held in primarily-residential areas and tended to cluster around each other (see Map 1 on page 6).

While play streets were held in all 7 districts, they were not evenly distributed. Some neighborhoods with high volumes and percentages of children did not have any play street applications, most notably in SW and SE Seattle (see Map 2 on page 6).

The program's set-up as a free and simple permit has led to rapid growth in overall applications, but we want to ensure that the program is equitably distributed in Seattle neighborhoods.

PSMP intends to partner with neighborhood organizations in the summer of 2016 to host larger play street events in these underrepresented areas. We're also developing materials for non-English speaking or ESL applicants.

CHART 2: PERMIT ISSUANCE

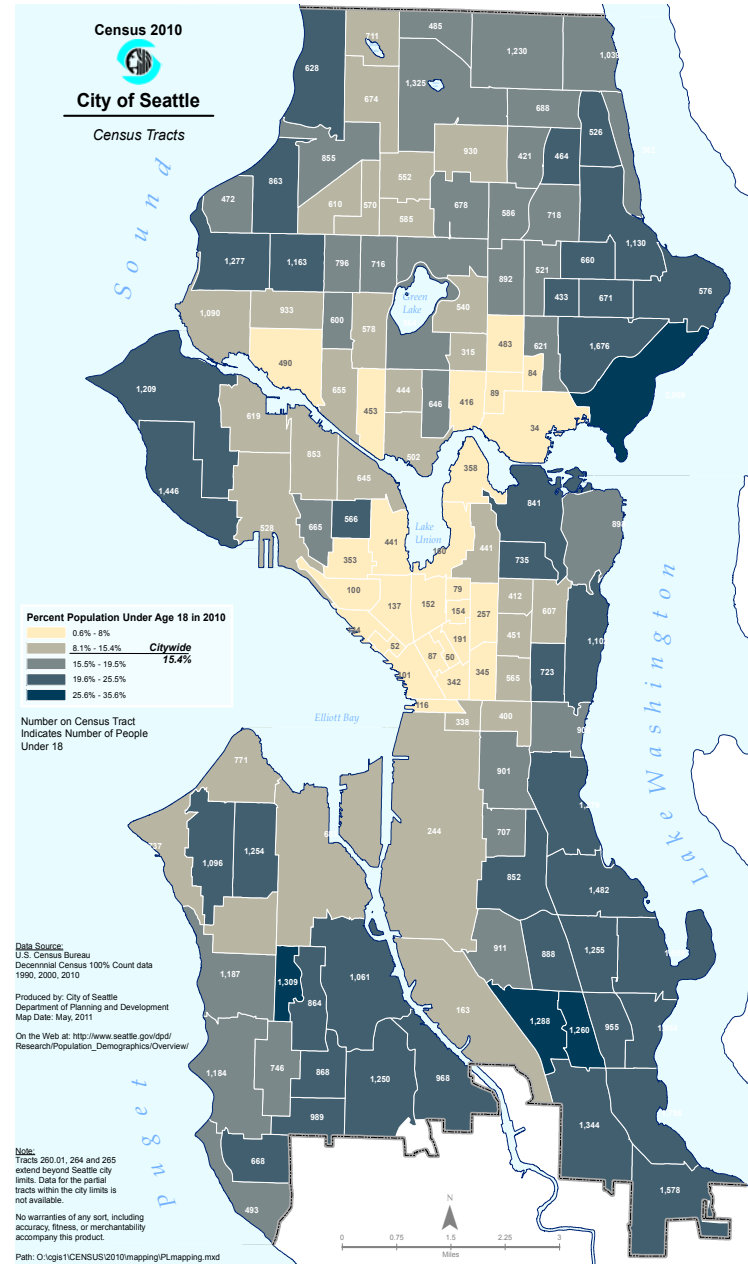


CREDIT: HOST JENNIFER WITTENBERG



Map 1: Play Street Locations (as of January 2016)

This map shows the location of blocks that were closed. Ongoing or upcoming play streets are shown in blue. Previous play streets are shown in red.



Map 2: Percent of Population under Age 18

This map shows the percent of total population by census tract that are age 18 or younger, with larger percentages shown in darker blue. Total numbers of those 18 and under are also shown in the center of each tract.

Contemporary Programs

As part of our program evaluation, we looked at similar play street programs in five other cities. The primary differences between the programs were the degree of central organization and the intended frequency of events. This breakdown is shown to the right.

In general, our pilot had the least up-front requirements and was the most widespread of the programs we found. This served the learning by experimentation aspect of the pilot well, but we found areas where we feel updated requirements would serve applicants and their neighbors better. These proposed changes are found on the following page.



<p>PHILADELPHIA</p> <p>Philadelphia sets a high bar for play street applicants, requiring 75% of households on the block to sign their approval for the closure.</p> <p>For each block, there is a maximum of five days per year and there is a permit fee of \$25 per date.</p>	<p>CHICAGO</p> <p>Implemented in 2012, Chicago has seen 422 hosted events. Of the play streets programs, theirs is the most controlled, but with good reason.</p> <p>A \$300k+ grant is distributed to community organizations who plan out a calendar of play street events. Local aldermen need to sign off on applications.</p>	<p>NEW YORK - SUMMER</p> <p>Limited to July 1 through August 31, NYC’s Summer Play Streets allows community groups to apply to the program.</p> <p>Applicants must provide signatures from a majority of the block residents and then receive approval from the community board, local police precinct, and DOT engineer.</p>
<p>NEW YORK - SCHOOLS</p> <p>Similar to their summer program, NYC’s School Play Streets allows community organizations and schools to close a street next to a school facility.</p> <p>Applicants must also receive approval from the community board, local police precinct, and DOT engineer.</p>	<p>HACKNEY BOROUGH, LONDON</p> <p>Of the programs studied, Hackney has the one most similar to our pilot program. Requirements are minimal and the applications are widespread.</p> <p>They require proof of neighbor notification, but no signatures. Applicants are encouraged to partner with neighborhood organizations, and a local non-profit assists with programming and resources.</p>	<p>SAN FRANCISCO</p> <p>Currently, play streets hosts in SF apply for block party permits. A formalized and separate play street program is in development.</p> <p>Applications are subject to a \$167-\$223 fee and must be approved at a public hearing. Barricades must be provided by a private vendor.</p> <p>There is no calendar restriction on when play streets can be held.</p>

Policy Changes

PROGRAM ELEMENT	CURRENT POLICY	RECOMMENDED POLICY	REASON FOR CHANGE
Application	1/ Single application sheet with basic information and checkboxes indicating that the applicant will barricade the street under our requirements and has notified their neighbors	1/ Application sheet with basic information 2/ Site plan indicating block to be closed and location of barricades 3/ Copy of neighbor outreach method (email, flyer, description of phone call or in-person contact)	Additional documentation will provide documentation that both the applicant and SDOT agree on permit requirements.
Neighbor Support	Applicants self-report that they have conducted outreach and have gained support from other neighbors on their block	Applicants will need to show how they contacted their neighbors and submit a signature sheet if they intend to have their play street more than once per month	Complaints had been filed about inadequate notification for neighbors. This will ensure that those immediately affected are notified.
Location	Can be on any street in the city so long as it is only one-block long and doesn't block an arterial or bus route	No change	No change recommended
Barricading	1/ Must barricade at both ends of the street 2/ Barricade objects should be placed no further than 5 feet apart 3/ Hosts can use standard road closure barricades or personal objects such as trash bins, household furniture, or cones 4/ SDOT provides two 'Play Street' signs to be displayed at each barricade	Same as current policy, with these additions: 5/ Barricades objects must be at least 3 feet in height 6/ Barricade objects should be linked together with rope, streamers, etc 7/ Type 3 barricades must be rented if the play street abuts an arterial	Some confusion about what is sufficient barricading in pilot requirements. The additional rules will make sure that barricade objects are of adequate size and spacing to ensure safety for those playing in the street and drivers.
Date/Frequency	1/ No restriction on date or frequency that the play street can be held	1/ Applications will be issued in two seasons (summer and winter) 2/ Maximum 3 days per week	To better balance use of the street and add efficiency to permit intake and issuance
Time	1/ Road must be cleared by 10pm 2/ No limit on number of hours per day	1/ Road must be cleared by 10pm or dusk, whichever is earlier 2/ Maximum 6 hours per day	Will also balance use of the street and promote safety by limiting to daylight hours
Programming	Programmed activities are encouraged	No change	No change recommended
Supervision	At least one adult needs to be present at each end of the block to answer questions and move barricades for local or emergency access	No change	No change recommended

Legislative Action

Historically, Seattle has encouraged the temporary use of the roadway for social and active uses when not crucial for the movement of traffic. With proper notification, barricades, and neighbor participation, local access to neighborhood streets can be maintained while allowing for other uses of the roadway.

SMC 11.16.125A “Director of Transportation—Authority—Street and alley closures” provides wide authority for SDOT to close streets to traffic. This authority allows for closures to occur for construction or utility work, and also for neighborhood and community events of all sizes. Our historic allowance of block party closures fall under this authority.

Currently, there is a section of code that could cause potential confusion given a formalized play street program. Unpermitted play in the roadway of any street is prohibited by SMC 11.40.250 “Playing in Streets”. This ordinance, enacted in 1979, broadly prohibits a number of activities from occurring in the roadway with the intent of minimizing potential collisions between vehicles and people.

To recognize Seattle’s use of its streets for neighborhood gathering and to clear up any potential confusion in the code, we’re seeking to make this minor amendment to SMC 11.40.250:

“No person upon roller skates, or riding in or by means of any coaster, skateboard, toy vehicle or similar device, shall go upon the roadway of any arterial street or transit coach route, except while crossing such street at a crosswalk; or engage in any sport, amusement or exercise or play in the roadway of any street, **except where allowed by a street use permit.**”

Feedback from Hosts and Neighbors

Throughout the pilot, we asked for feedback from play street hosts, neighbors, and passers-by about their experiences of the program. The vast majority of comments were in strong support of the program and its continuation.

Of the 240+ play street permits issued, we only received concerns or complaints for 4%. The most common concern was around barricading, which informed our recommended changes to that requirement. Other complaints stemmed from lack of awareness of the program or inadequate outreach to neighbors. Both of these concerns have also been addressed in our policy changes.

In the two years of the pilot, no injuries or collisions occurred during or as a result of a play street closure.

Hosts have been highly supportive of an ongoing program. Below are sample feedback directly from hosts:

“This program was SO successful for our block. Every Thursday we were outside, eating and playing together, getting to know all of our neighbors and really created a community.”

“We’ve really enjoyed this and it has made our street a lot safer for the kids to play in. All of our neighbors are very happy and attentive to the rules as well.”

“I love the program. I feel like I know a lot of my neighbors that I didn’t before, even from other streets. People walk by and strike up conversations while their kids join the fun.”

Seattle Department of Transportation
700 5th Ave, Suite 3800
PO BOX 34996
Seattle, WA 98124-4996
(206) 684-ROAD (7623)
www.seattle.gov/transportation

