



Office of the City Manager

CONSENT CALENDAR

June 9, 2026

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

From: Paul Buddenhagen, City Manager

Submitted by: Peter Radu, Assistant to the City Manager, Neighborhood Services
Carianna Arredondo, Assistant to the City Manager

Subject: Companion Report: Policy Recommendations for the City of Berkeley
Regarding Event Producers and Civic Events

RECOMMENDATION

Refer to the City Manager:

1. A feasibility and cost analysis of the Civic Arts Commission's Policy Recommendations, with the inclusion of alternative recommendations that meet the Civic Arts Commission's intention of an equitable, transparent, efficient, and predictable special events program in Berkeley;
2. Present analytical findings and any alternative policy recommendations to the Civic Arts Commission for feedback and stakeholder engagement; and
3. Return to the City Council with findings and final recommendations regarding Special Events in Berkeley.

FISCAL IMPACTS OF RECOMMENDATION

Performing this analysis and developing findings and finalized recommendations will require dedicated staff time from the multiple city departments responsible for reviewing and approving all permitted park and street events in Berkeley.

CURRENT SITUATION AND ITS EFFECTS

The Civic Arts Commission's recommendations reflect shared goals held by City staff, who strongly agree that Berkeley benefits from a vibrant civic events calendar and that event permitting should be clearer, more consistent, and more equitable. The Civic Arts Commission plays a critical role in Berkeley's reputation as a vibrant cultural destination for street and park events, distributing approximately \$150,000–\$200,000 annually in Community Festival Grants to more than 30 nonprofit organizations and community producers who organize and produce many of Berkeley's most beloved special events. These City-supported festivals depend on Berkeley's special events permitting process.

Once an event producer submits a special event application to the city, application review, revisions/corrections, and approvals are conducted through a multi-

departmental team in which most participating staff are not dedicated full-time to events and must also cover other core city functions. Participating departments who must review and approve special event applications include but are not limited to the City Manager's Office; Berkeley Fire Department; Berkeley Police Department; Berkeley Public Works; Health, Housing and Community Services; and Parks, Recreation and Waterfront. With the exception of one Program Manager in Neighborhood Services who coordinates this cross-departmental team and liaises with event applicants, none of these staff work full time on special events. They are also directly responsible for numerous other city priorities, including routine public safety operations, construction-related closures, inspections, encampment operations, and other citywide service obligations. This distributed staffing model makes special events highly sensitive to citywide workload demands, staffing vacancies, and equipment availability.

As a result, and as noted in the October 14, 2025 Staff Report¹ titled, "Changes to Special Events Permitting Fees and Requirements," as well as the May 20, 2026 Off Agenda Memo² titled, "Interim Measures to Address Special Events Staffing Challenges," Berkeley's special events system is currently experiencing structural strain. The City's annual number of special events has surpassed pre-pandemic levels, with a notable increase in requests for street closure events (which require the most time-consuming and complex reviews). Because the Special Events team strives to be flexible and accommodating to all who wish to host an event in Berkeley, it rarely rejects an event proposal. However, this customer-focused orientation can create a highly chaotic workload for the operations team reviewing events, with numerous events competing for staff time every week and short application submission timelines – with some applications received mere weeks or even days prior to the proposed event date – upending review timelines, compounding staff stress, and compromising responsiveness to organizers. This highly customer-focused orientation has inadvertently reinforced many of the issues the Civic Arts Commission's policy recommendations identifies as problematic. Staff agree with the Commission wholeheartedly that the status quo is not sustainable.

The Commission's recommendations include items that range from low-cost process improvements to major structural and technology investments, including a potential centralized special events department and a single publicly accessible permitting platform. From a fiscal standpoint, the City faces two realities:

¹ <https://berkeleyca.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2025-10-14%20Item%2014%20Changes%20to%20Special%20Events%20Permitting.pdf>

² <https://berkeleyca.gov/sites/default/files/2026-05/2026-05-20%20%20%20%20Interim%20Measures%20to%20Address%20Special%20Events%20Staffing%20Challenges.pdf>

1. **Capacity is constrained.** Special events are coordinated across multiple departments, and most reviewers are not dedicated solely to events. Any expectation of increased responsiveness, expanded field support, or faster timelines must be paired with either (a) new resources, or (b) reduced scope/service levels elsewhere.
2. **Cost recovery has not kept pace with the City's rising costs of hosting and accommodating events.** As a result, multiple departments have moved toward fee adjustments and regulatory changes to better recover costs as event demand increases. Because the City owns and is ultimately liable for what happens on its streets and in its parks, there are real limits to community members' and event organizers' involvement in the event production process, and there are real costs associated with those limits that currently have no source of subsidy in the City's budget.

Staff support the spirit of the Commission's recommendations, but implementation of any changes to the City's special events review and approval processes must be sequenced and right-sized to the City's staffing and fiscal capacity. As such, staff recommend that the City Council refer the Civic Arts Commission's recommendations to the City Manager for an analysis of cost and feasibility, identifying those recommendations that can be implemented, those that would need additional resources to implement, and those whose intended outcomes might best be addressed with alternative recommendations that recognize the City's real fiscal and operational constraints.

BACKGROUND

Berkeley has long had a reputation as a destination for culture, food, and vibrant public life. Cultural and civic events—ranging from neighborhood block parties to multi-day festivals—play a meaningful role in shaping that identity and supporting community cohesion and local economic activity. At the same time, Berkeley's special events permitting system is currently under growing operational strain. The City permitted 185 special events in 2024 (not including the City's three weekly farmers' markets), and demand has surpassed pre-pandemic levels, with a notable increase in street closures compared to prior years.

On October 14, 2025, the City Manager's Office provided Council with an Information Report, "Changes to Special Events Permitting Fees and Requirements," summarizing impending and proposed changes to special events permitting fees and requirements, including department-specific efforts to improve cost recovery, update regulatory standards, and increase consistency and rigor in the application of public safety requirements.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE IMPACTS

There are no identified environmental or climate impacts associated with staff's recommendation.

RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATION

Staff share the Civic Arts Commissions desire for a more equitable, transparent, efficient, and predictable special events program in Berkeley, but are concerned about the cost and feasibility of implementing them as written in a budget- and staffing-constrained environment.

ALTERNATIVE ACTIONS CONSIDERED

None.

CONTACT PERSON

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