

# UNTAPED

Removing Barriers for Public Space Programming



DESIGN TRUST  
FOR PUBLIC SPACE

# Untaped

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**Acknowledgements**

Untaped is made possible by generous support from:

**The New York Community Trust  
The NYC Green Fund**

The Design Trust for Public Space would like to thank the following agencies, partners, and stakeholders for their time, strategic support, and valuable insights:

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Trust for Public Land  
Alice Austen House  
Queensboro Dance Festival  
Uptown Grand Central  
Brownsville Community Justice Center  
The POINT CDC

**With Appreciation**

Downtown Brooklyn Partnership  
Mayor's Office of Public Realm  
NYC Department of Transportation  
NYC Department of Parks and Recreation  
NYC Street Activity Permit Office  
Public Housing Community Fund  
Street Vendor Project  
Union Square Partnership  
Urban Design Forum

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Version 1.1 - Last update: March 2026

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## Executive Summary

New Yorkers deserve world-class public spaces in neighborhoods across the five boroughs. Over the past 30 years, the City of New York, community organizations, and dedicated residents have made enormous strides in improving the quality and extent of this public realm, which can include parks, plazas, waterfronts, sidewalks, streets, libraries, and more. Today, there are 30,000+ acres of parkland, 70+ public plazas, 595 privately-owned public spaces, and 200 open streets, enjoyed by over 8.4 million New Yorkers across the city. Public space should function as a shared resource supported by clear standards, modern digital tools, and a permitting ecosystem that is predictable, accessible, and equitable.

The research conducted through the Untaped initiative reveals a public realm ecosystem in New York City that is rich with community creativity and civic commitment, yet constrained by structural barriers that limit access, consistency, and equity. The project surfaced clear patterns that highlight where the system succeeds, where it falls short, and where meaningful reform is both possible and urgently needed.

## Our Vision for Public Space Equity

- A We have to systemically shift how we value and manage our public realm.** Despite the breadth of public spaces available across the city, our communities often find themselves unable to program these spaces due to layers of requirements, permits, and fees.
- B We can simplify and streamline permitting processes to encourage public space activation.** Applicants need to be armed with the right information and technical resources along the permitting journey to successfully complete applications quickly and accurately.
- C We need to earn the trust and build the capacity of our public realm stewards.** Communities, small organizations, and volunteers would benefit from resources and know-how to help make the procedures of activating the public realm more accessible.

## How Can We Achieve this Vision?

**We have to systemically shift how we value and manage our public realm.**



### 1. Centralizing Public Programming in the Office of the Mayor

The City of New York should create a centralized office for public space programming by integrating the role of the Office of the Public Realm with the current functions of the Mayor’s Office of Citywide Event Coordination and Management (CECM) and the Street Activity Permit Office (SAPO), creating a strengthened center for public realm oversight, coordination, and strategy.



### 2. Tiered and Performance-Based Qualification Rubric

The City of New York should simplify the permitting structure for public realm permit approvals by creating a tiered event qualification standard. In addition, the City should reform its permitting fees, insurance requirements, and other parameters to align with these tiers, ensuring that smaller activations don’t face unnecessary red tape and that larger activations can generate appropriate revenue for the city.



### 3. A Public Realm Evaluation Platform

An NYC Public Space Programming Impact Tool, which could be developed as an open-source web-based platform to catalog the impact of the smallest and largest programs across the city, should be developed by a coalition of public, private, and civic partners.

**We can simplify and streamline permitting processes to encourage public space activation.**



### 4. Targeted UX/UI Refinements

The City of New York should undertake targeted, independent user experience and user interface (UX/UI) refinements to its existing E-Apply permitting software and associated informational websites, specifically those managed by SAPO (Street Activity Permit Office) and NYC Parks, to significantly improve accessibility, clarity, and public trust in the permitting process.

**5. One-Stop Shop**

The City of New York should launch a single, mobile-friendly, centralized website that consolidates every step and resource required to plan and permit public-space activations. Designed as a clear, contemporary, and multilingual experience, this “one-stop shop” would let applicants understand what permits they need, when to apply, what it costs, and how to comply, without having to navigate multiple agency sites or rely on too much staff intervention.



**6. “Space Stager” Public Space Digital Mapping**

New York City should establish a public space mapping tool, an interactive digital platform designed to transform the way public space activations are planned, permitted, and managed. The tool would function as a citywide public programming atlas, merging the real-time collaborative features of platforms like Miro or Canvas with the mapping power of OpenStreetMap and ZoLa NYC.



**We need to earn the trust and build the capacity of our public realm stewards.**

**7. Seasonal Activation Partner Permit**

The City of New York should establish a Seasonal Activation Partner Permit (SAPP), a streamlined, medium-term permitting mechanism that allows qualified community partners, cultural organizations, local nonprofits, and small business alliances to repeatedly activate public spaces over the course of a defined season and within defined parameters, without having to reapply for individual permits for each event.



**8. NYC Public Space Stewardship Fund**

The City of New York should work with the philanthropic and civic communities to establish an NYC Public Space Stewardship Fund, a private 501(c)3 that can raise money from multiple sources, including public grants, municipal allocations, philanthropic contributions, corporate donations and partnerships, and grassroots fundraising to support under-resourced community groups, cultural organizations, and small-scale public space stewards.



**What Do We Risk?**

Public space management and activations drive powerful social, economic, health, and community-building benefits. Their wide-ranging community, placemaking, economic, and fiscal impacts are felt across neighborhoods and local economies.

- Public space programming serves as one of the most important tools to build community and improve social cohesion.
- Public space programming can create positive shifts in perceptions of neighborhoods and can catalyze economic growth.
- Programming supercharges the ability for public spaces to improve public health and public safety.
- Arts and cultural programming is a fundamental right and a tool for healthier communities.

**Fig 1.** (Below) Turnout NYC event at Brownsville Community Justice Center with Brooklyn Fam; Credit: Design Trust for Public Space



# Introduction

Across New York City, public spaces are increasingly recognized as essential civic infrastructure, places where communities gather, celebrate, heal, organize, exchange culture, and build local economies. Over the past thirty years, the City of New York, community organizations, and dedicated residents have made enormous strides in improving the quality and extent of this public realm, which can include parks, plazas, waterfronts, sidewalks, streets, libraries, and more. This transformation has also expanded the amount of outdoor public programming, whether that's a block party for a few dozen neighbors or a multi-day festival with tens of thousands of attendees.

Today, with budget forecasts showing potential deficits, and with city government prioritizing costly investments like affordable housing, the public realm agenda is facing an important juncture. How can New

Fig 2. (Right) Juneteenth performance; Credit: Van Cortlandt Park Alliance



York City continue to deliver on a visionary public realm that makes city life worthwhile and enjoyable, with limited resources and time to do so? **The answer is simple: by cutting red tape, eliminating unnecessary barriers, and unlocking the potential of our public realm partnerships.**

Public events in New York are produced by an impressive combination of private organizations, individuals, and city agencies. NYC Parks alone hosts over 13,000 free events in its spaces, in addition to providing direction, regulation, and support of other activities. NYC DOT's plaza program has invigorated 92 public spaces across the city with activations and programs. This agency leadership is complemented by thousands of private organizations of all types—arts, social service, community, educational—who are responsible for creating these events

or are producing events of their own design. This incredible ecosystem helps move forward the nearly 30,000 events that animate our city on a yearly basis. This demand has created additional pressure on how groups manage these diverse uses and needs, especially smaller public spaces that lack conservancy groups and smaller organizations looking to put on events with fewer than 500 people. Elected officials recognize that the city will increasingly have to depend on private entities to step in and deliver important resources for our neighborhoods.

*Untaped*, a citywide initiative led by the Design Trust for Public Space, set out to understand these barriers and develop actionable strategies to unlock the full potential of New York’s public realm. The coalition worked towards the following three goals:

- A. Make parks and public space inherently more open and accessible to arts, cultural, culinary, educational, and social organizations, especially in historically marginalized neighborhoods.
- B. Model innovative new methods of public-private partnerships in public space programming across the city, especially focused on smaller, civic-minded partnerships.
- C. Use the insights derived from this project to create a national model for public programming regulations based on the unique challenges of every locality.

Through a year-long research and engagement process, including workshops, interviews, focus groups, surveys, and cross-sector advisory sessions, the project brought together over 55 stakeholders across all five boroughs. This included nonprofit partners—the City Parks Foundation and Trust for Public Land—that served as key partners, offering citywide and nationwide perspectives. It included key agencies responsible for stewarding, programming, and activating public spaces across the city, especially the NYC Department of Transportation and NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, two agencies that manage a great majority of citywide events.

*Untaped* approached this work from a community-centered and policy-driven perspective, grounded in the belief that public space should be joyful to use and accessible to organizations of all sizes, especially those with limited administrative capacity. Organizers should be able to bring people together without navigating a maze of siloed digital portals, opaque requirements, last-minute surprises, or high financial

barriers. Public space should function as a shared resource supported by clear standards, modern digital tools, and a permitting ecosystem that is predictable, accessible, and equitable.

While City agencies are responsible for managing many of the recommendations and related activities in this report, *Untaped* is directed at a citywide conversation, one that needs top-level leadership. Key agencies responsible for stewarding, programming, and activating public spaces across the city, especially the NYC Department of Transportation and NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, manage a great majority of NYC events and do so with great skill. These agencies are also overstretched in their capacity to manage existing capacity, to reform their systems, or to think collaboratively across other agencies, including the Police and Fire Departments, the Health Department, and other regulatory bodies. *Untaped* seeks citywide leadership and investment in creating solutions.

*Untaped* uncovered a crucial finding that the barriers facing public space organizers are not simply a result of a single broken step, but of a fragmented system in need of alignment, clarity, modernization, and investment. Community groups want to animate their neighborhoods, agencies want safe and coordinated public spaces, and ultimately, both parties need a permitting system and a public realm governance structure that is designed for today’s cultural life and adapted to today’s technology.

**Untaped offers a roadmap for a city where public space is public, open, accessible, and animated by the full diversity of its people.**

Fig 3. (Right) Summer Streets 2024; Credit: NYC Department of Transportation



**"A simple meetup to play the board game Jenga requires 34th Avenue Open Street in Queens to have the same million-dollar insurance coverage as a large one-off dance performance with a stage and speakers.**

**Organizers sometimes don't even learn whether their events are approved until the day before."**

- Jackson Chabot, Elana Ehrenberg, and Rebecca Macklis. "Free NYC's Block Parties from Suffocating Red Tape," City Limits, May 23, 2024,

**"Since at least 2016, New York City has maintained a rolling moratorium on new multi-block, multi-day street fair permits. The same festivals, run by the same production companies, return year after year while community groups in the Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn have no pathway to enter the program."**

- "Streets for People," NYC Comptroller, April 25, 2025

## What We Learned

The Untaped initiative employed a four-phase approach supported by cross-sector partnerships, and meaningful engagement with New Yorkers who regularly activate the public realm. Led by the Design Trust for Public Space, the process combined community insight with agency expertise to build a more accessible, collaborative, and equitable framework for public space activation in New York City. The approach balanced the experiences of organizers across all five boroughs, while also drawing on national lessons from cities advancing innovative models for public realm stewardship.

The research conducted through the Untaped initiative reveals a public realm ecosystem in New York City that is rich with community creativity and civic commitment, yet constrained by structural barriers that limit access, consistency, and equity. The project surfaced clear patterns that highlight where the system succeeds, where it falls short, and where meaningful reform is both possible and urgently needed.

Taken together, these findings form the evidentiary backbone for the eight recommendations in this report. The insights reflect the lived experiences of organizers working in plazas, sidewalks, schoolyards, waterfronts, parks, and streets across all five boroughs, particularly in historically underinvested neighborhoods where public space programming carries heightened social and economic significance.

**Fig 4.** (Below) Summer Street 2024; Source: NYC Department of Transportation



### A System Defined by Fragmentation, Redundancy, and Inconsistency

The research found that New York City's permitting environment is not lacking in effort or intent, but in alignment. Agencies operate in silos, each with their own definitions, timelines, risk thresholds, and digital systems or a lack thereof. The result is a permitting landscape that feels inconsistent and unpredictable even to experienced event planners and community organizers.

Applicants regularly reported inconsistent requirements (especially around insurance and documentation) depending on the permitting officer, agency, or location; this fuels a perception of inequity and erodes trust. Agencies shared these perspectives and cited the lack of resources, people, and tools that could help them move these applications more efficiently. For emerging groups and smaller organizations, this lack of predictability becomes a structural barrier that discourages participation altogether and, as a result, limits geographic equity of public space programming.

### Access Barriers Rooted in Administrative Burden and Hidden Costs

While fees are a challenge, research revealed that administrative burden (not cost alone) is often the greatest barrier. Across interviews and workshops, partners emphasized the time-consuming, multi-step, and often confusing nature of the existing permitting process. Many smaller organizations lack dedicated administrative staff and must rely on volunteers to navigate dense applications, insurance procurement, multiple forms, and shifting permitting instructions.

Insurance emerged as a particularly significant barrier. The absence of low-risk event categories forces small organizations into purchasing insurance packages that are disproportionate to the scale of their activities. This results in both financial strain and discouragement from future programming.

### Digital Tools Are Outdated, Non-Intuitive, and Not Mobile-Centered

The research confirmed widespread issues with digital permitting tools, including missing calendar insights/updates, unclear language or application status, inaccessible forms, and outdated informational websites. For many organizers who rely primarily on mobile devices, the platforms feel nearly unusable.

“We know we’re required to obtain sound permits from NYPD, but it always depends on the precinct. Some see that your event is over at 4pm on a Saturday, so they don’t worry about it. Other times, they ask you to come on the day of the event, but we don’t have time to go to the precinct day of the event because we’re also running around managing set-up”

-Karesia Batan, Queensboro Dance Festival

**"Casita Maria has worked to activate Raul del Valle Square, a public plaza managed by the NYC Parks Department. When they want to put on a performance they must get a:**

Sound permit - Must contact the local NYPD 42nd Precinct directly. Sound permits are not managed through SAPO or Parks.

Festival permit - Must apply through SAPO via E-Apply. Separate application, separate timeline, separate documentation requirements.

Public art installation - Approval required from the NYC Department of Transportation, even though the space is managed by Parks.

Parks use permit - The underlying right to use the plaza at all requires coordination with NYC Parks.

**Four agencies. Four separate processes. Four separate timelines."**

- *Neighborhood Commons, 2022*, Design Trust for Public Space

This contributes to a perception that the permitting process is not designed for everyday New Yorkers, but rather for organizations with professional administrative infrastructure. Research affirmed the need for a unified, mobile-first, and user-centered permitting experience.

**Weather-Related Vulnerability Is a Major System Gap**

Across stakeholder outreach, partners described weather unpredictability (particularly rain) as one of the most destabilizing factors for public space activations. While rain-date accommodations pose feasibility hurdles, a single storm can erase months of planning and funding. Additionally, redoing applications and gathering permits when weather hits forces many organizations to redo much of the work, instead of being able to pull forward a saved application.

This gap disproportionately impacts smaller organizations and threatens continued participation in the public realm. Research framed weather flexibility as not simply an operational improvement, but a major equity intervention.

**Community Organizations Demonstrate Deep Capacity, but Need Structural Support**

The research surfaced a powerful strength: the staff of New York City’s community organizations are highly capable, innovative, and deeply committed to their neighborhoods. Many have years (sometimes decades) of programming experience. They understand local needs, partner effectively with small businesses and residents, and activate public space in ways that strengthen community life, cultural identity, and social resilience.

Yet their capacity is often diverted toward navigating bureaucracy rather than producing public benefit. Stakeholders consistently expressed a desire for long-term collaborative partnerships with the City, rather than transactional, event-by-event interactions.

**Measuring the Impact of Public Space Programming Is Critical but Resource-Intensive and Costly**

Across stakeholder interviews, community groups described a largely pragmatic, grant-driven approach to measuring the impact of public space programming. Most evaluation efforts are currently shaped by funder requirements and available expertise and resources, leading

organizations to focus on what is feasible rather than comprehensive. Data collection is often motivated by the need to justify funding, strengthen future grant applications, and demonstrate value to partners and agencies.

Many stakeholders emphasized the importance of sharing data with public agencies to address inequities in under-invested neighborhoods, and to leverage evidence to attract greater, more sustained public investment alongside philanthropic support.

**Added Complexity with Vending, Concessions, and Event-Based Revenue Generation**

A recurring barrier across interviews was confusion about vending and concession regulations. Organizers emphasized that while public space events are increasingly expected to be lively, culturally rich, and economically supportive of neighborhoods, the rules governing food sales, merchandise, ticketing, and revenue generation remain some of the most opaque and burdensome elements of the permitting process. While SAPO can issue commercial event permits, the moment an organizer introduces food sales or merchandise to their programming, they enter a separate regulatory framework involving concessions, health permits, and a legal framework with a far higher barrier to entry. This creates inequitable conditions in which only well-resourced event producers can reliably generate revenue through public space activations.

Fig 5. (Below) Turnout NYC graphic marker; Source: Design Trust for Public Space; Fig 6. (Right below) Friday Night Cabaret; Source: Leonardo Mascaro



**“One Open Streets partner reported that the SAPO process led to the loss of more volunteers than any other task associated with the program. Even for applicants comfortable with navigating bureaucracy, SAPO’s non-intuitive website design, vague expectations, and burdensome requirements are overwhelming.”**

- "Streets for People," 2025

**"When a Bed-Stuy block association tried to organize their first block party in 2021 after reviving a defunct neighborhood group, they ran into a problem:**

**'Our first attempt to apply online was denied because we were applying to have local businesses that are on the corner of our block participate as block association members.'**

**The city’s rules distinguish between a “block party” (residents only, no sales) and a “single block festival” (nonprofits, can fundraise and sell), but the difference between these categories is not surfaced clearly in the application interface."**

-Divya Murthy, "Hot to Throw a Block Party in New York City," The City, 2023

Citywide Events By Year

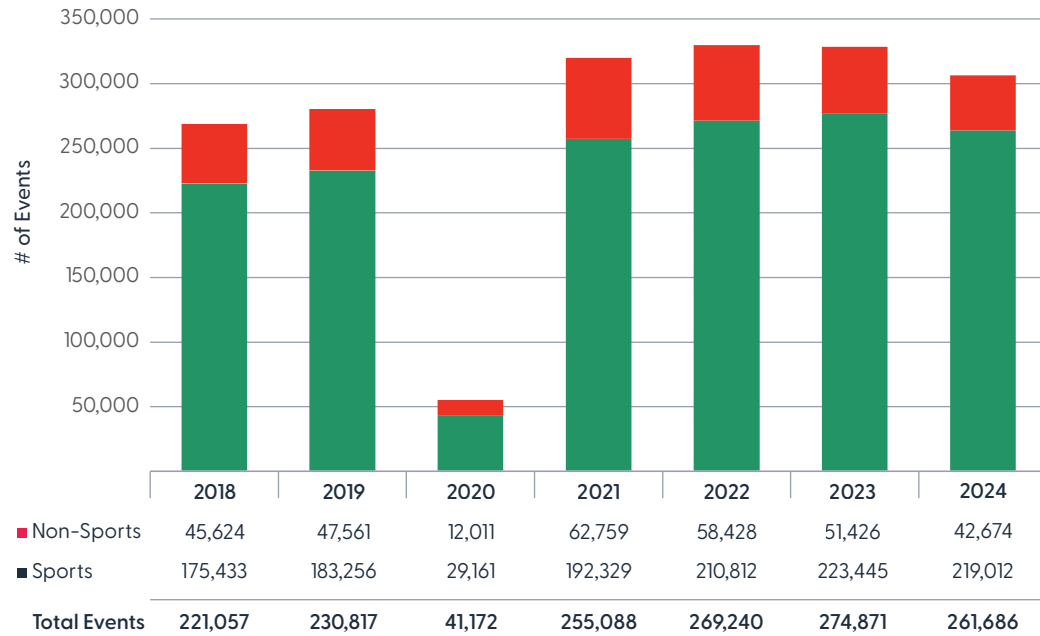


Fig 7. & 8 (Left) Source: Citwide Events Coordination Management

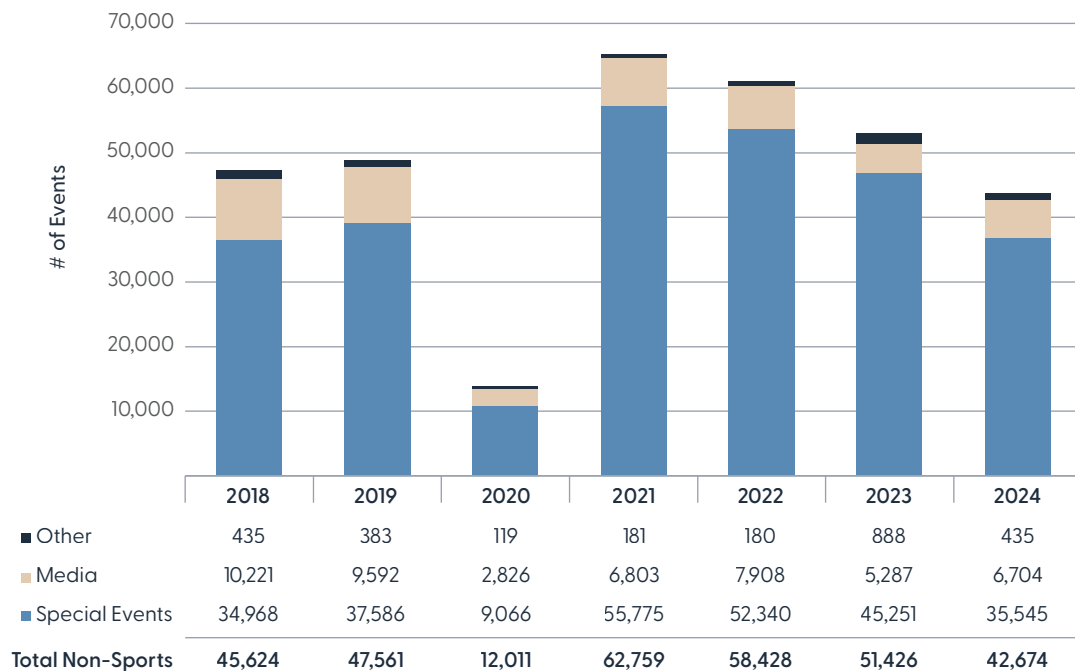
**Between 1998 and 2024, sports events have represented nearly 80% of all events in NYC.**

**New York City Event Data**

This analysis examines 1,553,931 permitted events across New York City's five boroughs from 2018 through 2024, drawn from the NYC Open Data special events permitting dataset. The data captures seven years of urban activity spanning the pre-pandemic era, a near-total shutdown in 2020, a vigorous rebound, and a period of normalization—offering a longitudinal window into New York's public space programming.

Sports-related events dominate, accounting for approximately 79.4% of all permitted activity. A supplemental analysis excluding sports permits reveals how special events, after experiencing a post-pandemic surge, have declined for four years straight. Media events, which include theater load-ins and film shoots, have remained a steady presence in NYC.

Non-Sports Events By Year



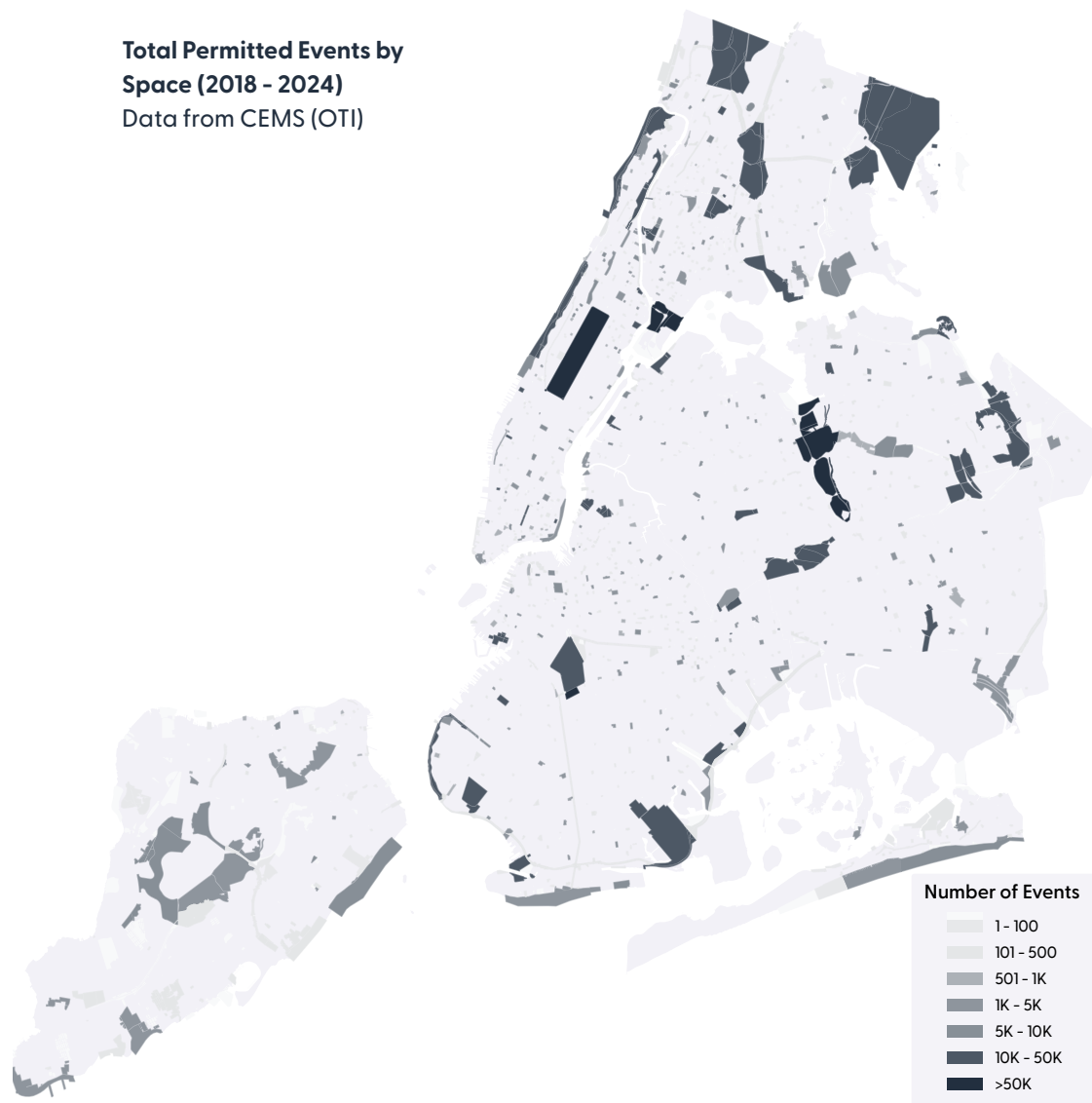
The overall dataset is dominated by recurring events, which represent approximately 85–92% of total permits in most years. This reflects the nature of youth sports programs—weekly league games that are permitted in aggregate. Many public spaces face competition for their use, putting pressure on communities and facilities to keep up with demand.

The non-recurring (one-time) event share is meaningfully higher within the non-sports category, indicating that special events, film shoots, and street activations are predominantly discrete occurrences rather than ongoing programs.

The ratio of recurring to one-time events shifted notably in 2021, when the non-sports one-time event count spiked to 42,738—nearly double the 2019 figure of 22,069. This suggests a wave of deferred or newly planned events entering the market as restrictions lifted, with organizers launching new initiatives alongside the return of pre-pandemic staples.

**Non-sports events, after a COVID dip and subsequent spike, have declined dramatically since 2021.**

**Total Permitted Events by Space (2018 - 2024)**  
Data from CEMS (OTI)

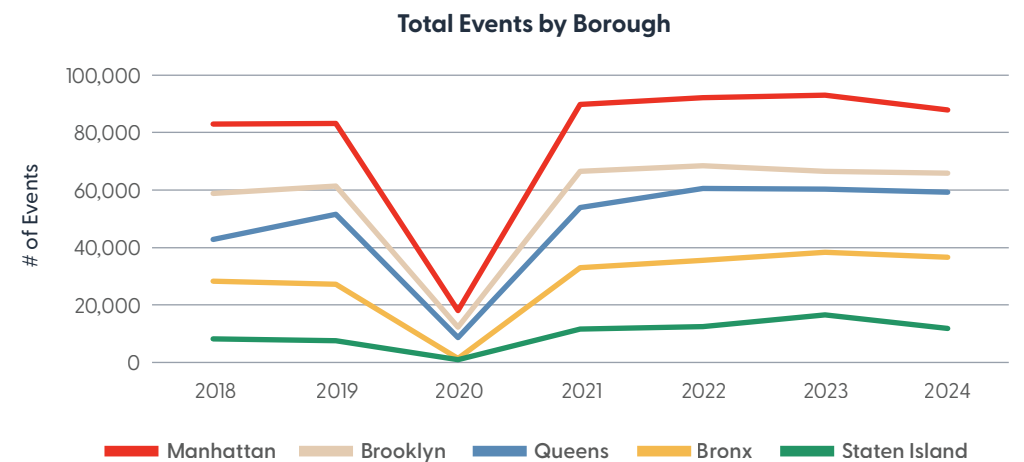


**Fig 9. & 10 (Left & Below)**  
Source: Citwide Events Coordination Management

## Public events take place across the five boroughs, with a few major parks seeing enormous demand.

### Public Event Distribution

Manhattan consistently commands the largest share of permitted events, averaging approximately 37% of citywide volume. Brooklyn is a stable second, followed by Queens—which has shown the most pronounced relative growth since 2018, suggesting an expanding event infrastructure in the borough. The Bronx and Staten Island remain smaller in absolute terms but both have recovered from pandemic-level lows.



## Why It Matters

Public space activations drive powerful social, economic, health, and community-building benefits. Their impacts reach across neighborhoods and local economies. When these benefits are clearly understood, advocates can speak more compellingly and creatively about why public space programming matters.

Across New York City’s five boroughs, a growing body of research confirms that public space programming delivers wide-ranging benefits for individuals, communities, and the city as a whole. New York City averages between 5,000 and 7,000 non-sports public events every month. Each contributes to the vitality of our neighborhoods and to the city’s tax base through direct and indirect spending. Beyond their enormous fiscal impact, these programs also deliver significant health, physical, social, and community benefits.

These impacts need to be weighed against the real costs of improving public space regulations. These include defending the city against lawsuits—both successful claims and unsuccessful cases that still require staff time and legal resources—as well as investments in new systems to manage these processes and the human resources to oversee them. Even so, the research is clear: The economic, social, and health returns of public space programming are substantial and enduring.

### 1. Public space programming serves as one of the most important tools to build community and improve social cohesion.

Public programming creates venues where residents connect, develop a sense of belonging, and strengthen their neighborhoods—often in ways that promote both physical and environmental health (Wilkerson, 2021). Stevenson (2020) finds that community events improve “social capital, interaction, participation, sense of place, and overall well-being.” These positive impacts can drive improved community engagement and higher levels of participation in community planning and civic life (Vest, Simmons, and Frumkin, 2024).

In communities that are divided or where some residents experience high levels of disinvestment and barriers to participation in civic life,

## Social Cohesion

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Yolal, M., Gursoy, D., Uysal, M., Kim, H. L., & Karacaoğlu, S. (2016). Impacts of festivals and events on residents' well-being. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 61, 1-18.

## Catalyst

Bureau of Policy and Organizing. 2025. "Streets for People: Open Streets and the Future of Public Space Management in NYC." *Office of the New York City Comptroller*.

Fig 11. (pg. 30-31) Kensington Plaza programming; Source: NYC Department of Transportation

## Why It Matters

pop-ups and tactical urbanism initiatives attract participation from a broader cross section of the community than other events. Festivals and community events help produce high quality public spaces that are more sociable, inclusive, and welcoming (McGillivray et al., 2021). This effect is stronger in events with arts and cultural components, as collaborative creative activities provide welcoming spaces for sharing new perspectives and draw participants who may hesitate to join other neighborhood activities.

When events like farmers' markets leverage community-tailored programming and partnerships, communities experience greater inclusion and trust-building among neighbors (Love and Kok, 2021). Well-used public spaces make entire areas more marketable and competitive, drawing residential and commercial tenants while improving customer satisfaction and spending (Project for Public Spaces, 2009).

### 2. Public space programming can create positive shifts in perceptions of neighborhoods and can catalyze economic growth.

Public space activations encourage people to spend more time in public spaces and help catalyze future investment. Property values often rise in response to nearby arts and cultural assets, especially when those assets are meaningfully connected to community interests (Hardy, 2023). Even when current investment is limited, "public spaces play a

critical role in shifting perceptions of place" and "public space investments can catalyze overdue infrastructure developments and 'pave the way' for additional private sector development" (Love and Kok, 2011). Residents appreciate the resulting quality of life im-

provements, with cultural and educational opportunities in neighborhood public spaces linked to their well-being (Yolal et al., 2016).

Investment in public space programming produces clear and demonstrable economic returns. Participants spend money on tickets, goods, and activities at these programs and nearby businesses, contributing millions to New York City's tax base. Economic impacts extend beyond direct spending to include indirect effects—through local suppliers—and induced effects, as employees of businesses and vendors spend their earnings locally. The New York City Comptroller (2025) found that in New York, Open Streets generated foot traffic and increased busi-



ness visibility and opportunities for growth. Programming encourages people to spend more time at their destinations and visit nearby shops and restaurants, increasing foot traffic and helping businesses thrive (Morrison, 2024).

Benefits often accrue to entrepreneurs and small businesses in particular. Public spaces themselves serve as "powerful incubators for entrepreneurs and small businesses" (Love and Kok, 2021). Neighborhood events and activities invite additional foot traffic back to commercial districts, encouraging the success of entrepreneurs with nearby brick-and-mortar locations or temporary retail spaces in the area (Ehrenberg, 2022). For entire neighborhoods, activations form a critical part of local culture—a key factor in making cities a destination for residents, employers, and investors. A Michigan State University study found that a variety of events and festivals contributed significantly to local cultural offerings and therefore to both short-term and long-term economic growth at the neighborhood level.

**3. Programming supercharges the ability for public spaces to improve public health and public safety.**

Public spaces such as parks and sidewalks make physical activity easier and more likely for more people to use, while parks with active

Morrison, Eva. 2024. "How Placemaking Positively Impacts Our Health." *Happy Cities*.

Ehrenberg, Elana. 2022. "How Public Spaces Can Keep Small Businesses Open." *Bloomberg CityLab Economy*.

Local Economic Planning. Economic Development Potential of Festivals, Arts and Culture. East Lansing: School of Planning, Design & Construction, Michigan State University, 2015.

**Fig 12.** (Below) Asphalt Asters; Source: Molly Gambardella



Foderaro, Lisa W., and Will Klein. 2023. "The Power of Parks to Promote Health: A Special Report." Trust for Public Land.

programming are associated with even stronger increases in physical activity. The resulting health benefits—both physical and mental—combine powerfully with improved social connections enabled by parks and community programming (Foderaro and Klein, 2023).

Beyond physical health benefits, active public spaces promote better public safety. Research on New York City's Open Streets program improved traffic safety, expanded play opportunities in neighborhoods,

**Public Health**

enhanced public safety, encouraged and facilitated access to services, built support for permanent street safety improvements, and strengthened community relationships (Bureau of Policy and Organizing, 2025). In

communities with long-standing inequities, community-focused programming can help address economic and social obstacles to health through programming and community-building (Barrios and Garner, 2024).

Barrios, Vanessa, and Christine Garner. 2024. "Reclaiming Public Space for Health Equity." Regional Plan Association.

**4. Arts and cultural programming is a fundamental right and a tool for healthier communities.**

Adults who attend live arts events experience lower levels of loneliness, while adults who lack access to or do not participate in public arts events report higher rates of isolation (National Endowment for the Arts, 2024). Cultural participation is strongly associated with improved mental health, emotional resilience, well-being, and social connection. Frequent participation in arts activities is also associated with higher life satisfaction, lower levels of mental distress, and greater physical functioning.

Many communities now "use public art and cultural assets as a tool for

**Culture**

health promotion...and to address inequities in the social determinants of health" (Arts Fund, 2018). Arts and culture events also drive economic impact, as attendees support local businesses and spend more money locally as a direct result of their attendance (Americans for the Arts, 2022). This produces higher levels of community pride, social cohesion, well-being, and neighborhood livability (Arts Fund, 2018).

National Endowment for the Arts. "Arts Attendance, Art-Making, and Social Connectedness: Spring/Summer 2024." 2024.

Arts Fund. 2018. "Arts & Health: What We've Learned."

Americans for the Arts. 2022. "Arts & Economic Prosperity 6."

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## Recommendation One

# Centralizing Public Programming in the Office of the Mayor

## What

The City of New York should create a centralized office for public space programming by integrating the role of the Office of the Public Realm with the current functions of the Mayor's Office of Citywide Event Coordination and Management (CECM) and the Street Activity Permit Office (SAPO), creating a strengthened center for public realm oversight, management, and strategy.

By taking this step, the City of New York could 1) streamline the process for communities and event organizers who must navigate multiple city agencies to produce programming, 2) give city agencies a unified leader to support collaboration and strategic management, and 3) elevate the public realm as a core, long-term priority of the Mayor's Office.

## Why It Matters

New Yorkers experience public spaces as a connected system. They do not categorize parks, sidewalks, streets, plazas, or community gardens by management entities or agency regulation. These spaces are valued collectively as neighborhood assets that support community life, culture, and local economies. Yet the permitting and approval processes governing these spaces are fragmented across multiple agencies and regulatory frameworks. This requires applicants to go through multiple kinds of processes, during which they are often expected to coordinate communication between agencies themselves. This complexity places a disproportionate burden on groups with less experience or fewer administrative resources.

Even city agencies face hurdles in coordinating their own procedures. Communication systems are often designed within the confines of each agency, meaning a paper record in one may not align with a digital form in another. As a result, both applicants and city staff experience uncertainty around approvals and responsibilities.

For this reason, agencies often value having representation within the Mayor's Office, where interagency coordination and policy leadership can occur. There are several existing mayoral entities, such as the Citywide Event Coordination and Management (CECM), Street Activity Permit Office (SAPO), and the Office of the Public Realm (OPR), that have demonstrated expertise, but could be strengthened with an increased ability to be strategic and help set citywide policy.

Many of the recommendations in the *Untaped* project require centralized leadership, though not rigid centralization. The New York City government is complex; this complexity has, for better or worse, evolved to reflect the complexity of the city. Reform often works best when there is strong political will and a mechanism to easily coordinate; it works less well when the City tries to create one process for the manifold kinds of end users and end products that help activate our public realm.

## How

Taking this step will require political will and organizational flexibility, but does not require a large investment from the City. While there are a variety of ways to structure, staff, and charge a new office overseeing the public realm and public space programming, the *Untaped* project identifies four considerations that should receive particular attention.

### 1. Reorganize the three mayoral offices

In order to strengthen executive leadership, centralize oversight of public realm events, and streamline citywide communications, the City should create a centralized office for public space and programming by integrating the Office of the Public Realm with CECM and SAPO. This renewed office would serve three primary functions: 1) provide strategic planning for the city's public realm; 2) advance key strategic initiatives and projects; and 3) serve as the centralized hub for public space permitting and management.



Fig 13. (Right) Diagram of combined mayoral entity and its roles

The first two functions build directly on the recent work of the Office of the Public Realm. Over the past three years the office has delivered important strategic visions, such as the “Realm of Possibility” report, which outlines 15 ways to improve the public realm. This kind of work can be developed and formalized, potentially with the release of recurring public realm plans for the city. Likewise, the OPR has helped to shepherd interagency projects, such as Outdoor Dining, sidewalk shed reform, Gotham Park, and public restroom development. These efforts demonstrate the value of strong leadership in addressing complex, cross-cutting challenges.

## Reform often works best when there is strong political will and a mechanism to easily coordinate.

The third function would represent a significant shift in operations. CECM and SAPO would be combined with OPR and would collectively report to a deputy mayor. While these offices currently hold substantial regulatory authority, they have limited capacity to shape policy upstream. This means that someone else is creating the policies that they in turn have to regulate. A centralized office could help ensure that new initiatives—such as expanded Open Streets—are designed in ways that are easier and more equitable to regulate.

### 2. Formalize interagency collaboration

The reorganization would also continue a practice of strong interagency coordination. In this initial evolution, the office would either provide permits directly (through SAPO) or provide coordination as necessary to agency partners in Parks, NYPD, NYFD, SBS, and others. It would also liaise, where appropriate, with other official bodies such as Council offices and Community Boards. Not only would it serve in a coordinating role, it would also make sure that coordination is in line with a strategic vision for the public realm and the broader priorities of the administration.

### 3. Identify opportunities for evolution

The reorganized office, now made a more permanent part of the city infrastructure, could also grow and mature to capture new functions and roles. At the outset, some events, like Open Streets (currently regulated by DOT) or events taking place in Parks spaces, would still

be managed by their host agencies. The office would provide coordinating support and help advance new policies. Over time, as the new structure demonstrates effectiveness, additional permitting functions could be integrated.

One of the gaps that the research for *Untaped* uncovered is the widely different systems that agencies use to permit. These systems don’t communicate with each other, largely because they have been sourced and developed by individual agencies, and not with a citywide lens. The office could project manage the development of new systems as technologies emerge. For example, the single contract that the Mayor’s Office awarded to Live XYZ to map storefront data has been widely successful. Similar partnerships could work with the office to develop new technologies to manage and permit events, publicize them with a broader audience, and think more creatively about revenue generation for the city (potentially developing significant resources for public events).

Fig 14. (Right) Summer Street;  
Source: NYC Department of  
Transportation



**4. Partner with the private sector**

Lastly, the new office could work in tandem with a complementary private entity dedicated to supporting the public realm, much like the Public Housing Community Fund or the Fund for Public Health does for NYCHA or the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene respectively. This would most likely be structured as an independent 501(c)3, but other incorporation options could be useful as well. This entity would, unlike a mayoral office, be able to raise funds to support important public space initiatives across the city, pilot innovative ideas, and support end users with technical assistance to communities and organizers. The office could partner with this new organization in a variety of ways, from an informal partnership to a more structured public-private partnership with shared contracts and operating goals. Additional details on this model are explored in **Recommendation Eight**, which proposes a Public Space Stewardship Fund.

**Fig 15.** (Below) Chuseok Festival, San Francisco; Source: Mark Shigenaga



**Precedent**

**City of San Francisco's Entertainment Commission**

The Entertainment Commission was established in 2002 through a voter-approved ballot measure (Proposition S) that fundamentally restructured how San Francisco manages its nightlife, events, and public entertainment. The Commission operates with seven commissioners serving four-year terms: four nominated by the Mayor and three appointed by the Board of Supervisors. The Commission meets twice monthly in public sessions and oversees a dedicated staff that includes permit inspectors, policy analysts, and administrative support.

The Commission functions as a semi-autonomous body with rulemaking authority. This independence has proven both a strength and a limitation: while it can move quickly on policy innovations without navigating complex bureaucratic approval chains, it also occasionally operates in tension with other city departments that view its mandate as overlapping with their own jurisdiction.

The Commission's original mandate centered on three primary functions: issuing and regulating entertainment permits, mediating conflicts between venues and residents, and developing policies that balance public safety with cultural vitality. Over two decades, this scope has expanded considerably. The Commission now oversees a unified permitting process for entertainment venues, special events, street festivals, and outdoor performances. This consolidation replaced a fragmented system where applicants navigated multiple departments—a scenario familiar to New York. A single Entertainment Permit now covers activities that previously required separate approvals from police, fire, health, and planning departments. While these agencies still conduct inspections and provide input, the Commission serves as the central coordinating body and final decision-maker for most entertainment-related activities.

Beyond permitting, the Commission has become an active policymaking body. It has developed comprehensive regulations around sound amplification, operating hours, security requirements, and crowd management. Notably, it created the city's "nightlife district" designations, where different standards apply to venues in entertainment-focused neighborhoods versus residential areas.

## Recommendation Two

# Tiered and Performance-Based Qualification

## What

The City of New York should simplify the permitting structure for public realm permit approvals by creating a tiered event qualification standard. In addition, the City should reform its permitting fees, insurance requirements, and other parameters to align with these tiers, ensuring that smaller activations don't face unnecessary red tape and that larger activations can generate appropriate revenue for the city.

This system would give applicants a clear-eyed view of what parameters trigger greater levels of insurance and allow those applicants to more easily tailor their events ahead of time. This would represent a shift from a taxonomic structure, which tries to classify every type of event (film shoot, plaza activation, picnic, food stall, etc), to a performance-based structure, which organizes the tiers based on their management needs. This more clearly identifies the appropriate triggers (excess noise, the presence of fire, large crowds, etc) that need mitigation.

## Why It Matters

Across multiple agencies (SAPO, Parks, DOT, DCLA, FDNY, NYPD, and others), community groups and small organizers face a landscape of confusing, inconsistent, and opaque permitting requirements. Similar events can be asked for different levels of insurance, documentation, and approvals depending on where they occur or who is processing the application. This creates uncertainty, delays, and avoidable costs. Many groups aren't sure, when requesting permits, what triggers higher fees or more burdensome regulations. These barriers disproportionately burden first-time, grassroots, and neighborhood-based organizers, the very groups the City seeks to uplift to achieve equity in the public realm.

Fig 16. (Below) Jamaica Queens Summer Festival; Source: Nat Valentine



## How

A published, tiered risk rubric addresses this directly. By making the risk assessment transparent up front, it standardizes expectations across agencies and boroughs and reduces staff review and coordination. A no-insurance Tier 1, paired with clear safety guardrails, removes a major financial barrier for low-risk, community-scale activations while still protecting public safety and the City's risk tolerance. The tiered event rubric recommendation requires substantial time and conversation amongst city staff, including the Law Department and most operating agencies, but it does not require significant capital investment or cost. These four steps will set up this recommendation for success:

### 1. Collaboratively define a rubric

The City should work across agencies and sectors to develop a clear rubric that organizes events into a set of tiers, based on measurable factors, such as expected attendance, event footprint, duration, structures, and activity types. These tiers would establish uniform thresholds for what is considered low, moderate, or high risk, and map directly to corresponding permitting, insurance, and documentation requirements.

NYC Parks already has a similar model, with events under 500 people and not having a promotional or commercial aspect requiring much simpler permits. NYC DOT, via SAPO, still categorizes its event by type and not by complexity. In a long-term version, the City could look to align its event permitting structure so that Parks and non-Parks events have similar thresholds.

Some of this work only requires a categorical reorganization, while some need more exhaustive reform. For example, the lowest-risk tier could be defined as events that don't require separate indemnification by the applicants, eliminating the burden of insurance costs for many small-scale producers. A simple terms-and-conditions waiver could be established and paired with a basic safety checklist that ensures ADA access, egress clearance, and sound compliance. This Tier One category would include the smallest, lowest-risk activations, such as community tabling, small performances, and block-level gatherings. The City could establish an appropriate cap on attendance, duration, and physical impact.

To develop this rubric and to periodically review their efficacy, the City should convene a Public Event Standards Task Force, a formal inter-

agency working group that includes SAPO, Parks, DOT, FDNY, NYPD, DCLA, the Law Department, and the Comptroller’s Office of Risk Management. This body would establish and update the rubric, adjudicate exceptions, and ensure alignment across jurisdictions. To do this work would require additional investment in people and tools to accomplish, as city agencies are currently under-resourced for their existing work.

## Tier One – Limited Risk Events

### Potential Characteristics

- Limited attendees and potential size
- Limited duration of event
- Lack of generators or electrical equipment
- No concessions
- Limited structures such as stages or large tents

### Potential Benefits

- Expedited application processing
- No insurance requirements
- Self-service options
- Reduced permitting fees

## Tier Two – Moderate Risk Events

### Potential Characteristics

- Moderate attendance expected
- Event duration can range
- Some power generation and equipment
- Concessions
- Structures that don't require DOB permits

### Potential Benefits

- Clear expectations for review and processing
- Insurance requirements are handled by custom insurance products
- Opportunity to work with staff person on application

## Tier Three – Complex Events

### Potential Characteristics

- Large attendance with crowd mitigation strategy needed
- Range of durations
- Complex power, electrical, and digital infrastructure
- Concessions and promotion
- Large structures such as stages or temporary buildings

### Potential Benefits

- Coordinated and long-lead coordination from multiple agencies
- Revenue generating for applicants and potentially for the City
- High-profile event with Mayoral coordination
- Dedicated staff managers for event success

### 2. Expose the back end

This new tiered structure will be visual and descriptive, and could potentially be embedded in the One-Stop Permitting Portal (**Rec. Five**) and interoperable with the Public Space Event Stager (**Rec. Six**) so applicants can (1) self-identify their tier, (2) generate an exact requirement checklist, and (3) produce simple, compliant site plans.

Transparency can build public confidence in the permitting process, reduce the amount of time-intensive correspondence, and make events safer. Once the tiers are finalized, they should be publicly released in plain language, translated into multiple languages, and paired with visual guides and FAQs that explain the purpose, process, and implications of each tier. This commitment to clear communication will state when and why insurance, fees, or additional documents are needed. By revealing the logic behind approvals, the City can move away from the perception of arbitrary or uneven enforcement, and applicants can make informed decisions about how to design their events, before a last-minute rejection or request comes from the City.

## Many groups aren’t sure, when requesting permits, what triggers higher fees or more burdensome regulations.

This should include publishing the decision tree used internally by agencies to determine permit requirements, along with a “what changed” log that tracks updates over time. This type of openness, already a best practice in other cities, would demystify a process that applicants currently describe as opaque and unpredictable.

Over time, to make the rubric tangible to applicants, the City should also develop a gallery of example event types, visual and descriptive case studies that outline common neighborhood events by their appropriate tiers, showing the corresponding permits, lead times, and fees. These examples would function as reference points for both applicants and agency staff, improving consistency across the city.

### 3. Make it usable on day one

For the rubric to be effective, it must be usable from day one. The City should integrate a “What’s my tier?” self-assessment feature within the recommended One-Stop Permitting Portal (**Rec. Five**). This digital tool would guide users through a short series of questions about event size, location, and logistics, automatically categorizing their event into the

appropriate tier and generating a personalized checklist of requirements. The system could also link directly to the Public Space Event Stager (**Rec. Six**), allowing organizers to upload or generate simple, dimensioned site diagrams that automatically validate key compliance elements such as hydrant clearance, egress widths, and ADA access.

Beyond technology, the City should focus on capacity-building and outreach. Agencies, in partnership with local arts councils, BIDs, and community-based organizations, should host quarterly office hours and training sessions to walk applicants through the rubric and application process. This outreach should specifically target first-time, emerging, and BIPOC-led organizations, groups that have historically faced the steepest learning curves and the most barriers to entry. Again, this enhanced service would require a hard look at current staffing levels and the need for additional resources. The Public-Private Partnership (**Rec. Eight**) organization could help allay some of these concerns by hosting many of these resources. By pairing digital tools with community education, the City can ensure that the rubric is both equitable and practical.

#### 4. Set up a structure that can evolve

The rubric should not be static; it should evolve as the City learns from data and experience. The implementation could begin on a pilot basis, perhaps limited by geography or through several trusted event partners, to test the thresholds and administrative processes. Feedback from both applicants and enforcement officers could inform the updates before a citywide launch.

The City could develop a dashboard of key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure and track the new tiered program over time. These indicators could include a blend of publicly shared and internal indicators. For example, the Law Department should be a regular partner in evaluating how updated standards impact the litigation faced by the City for public events.

The Public Event Standards Task Force could be occasionally empowered to conduct an evidence-based review, using permitting data and community feedback to refine definitions and thresholds. Over time, the rubric would become a foundational policy instrument, codified across agencies and embedded within the City's broader strategy for public space management. It would bring coherence, fairness, and predictability to a system that currently relies too heavily on discretion and institutional memory.

## Precedent

### City of Boston's Special Event Tier Tool

Boston's Special Event Tier Tool demonstrates a way that this might work in practice. Rather than organizing permits by event type, Boston categorizes all outdoor events into three tiers based on measurable risk factors including event duration (single versus multiple days), spatial footprint (one city block versus multiple blocks), whether the event is stationary or mobile, anticipated attendance thresholds (under 150, 150-250, or over 250 people), and the presence of complicating factors such as vending, alcohol service, or large equipment. Each tier corresponds to differentiated requirements for application deadlines, processing timelines, insurance levels, and fees.

Boston's system offers applicants a transparent self-assessment tool before formal submission. This allows organizers to understand in advance what tier their event will likely fall into and adjust their plans accordingly to minimize costs and complexity. The Special Events Committee makes the final tier determination upon application review, but the published framework reduces uncertainty and prevents surprises during the approval process. This transparency directly addresses the opacity that New York applicants currently face, where similar events receive inconsistent treatment depending on agency interpretation or location.

New York could build on this foundation by incorporating additional refinements such as a true no-insurance tier for the smallest gatherings, multilingual guidance materials, integration with digital site planning tools, and stronger interagency coordination through a dedicated task force.

### Recommendation Three

# Public Realm Evaluation Platform

### What

An NYC Public Space Programming Impact Tool, which could be developed as an open-source web-based platform to catalog the impact of the smallest and largest programs across the city, should be developed by a coalition of public, private, and civic partners. It would develop an exhaustive set of potential indicators, each with common measurement strategies. Programming partners could select and use the indicators that match their organizational needs. Data would be available for partners to understand their local impacts and would aggregate, anonymously, into a citywide database. This citywide data would catalog the annual impact of public space programming, detect trends, and identify ongoing areas for policy development.

## Why It Matters

To date, the City of New York has not established a consistent and standardized method for evaluating the impact of public space and public space programming, whether a private venture or a program administered by New York City departments, including Small Business Services, Department of Transportation, Department of Parks and Recreation, Special Activity Permit Office, and Department of Cultural Affairs. As such, advocates, policymakers, and agencies have been unable to effectively communicate the collective value of their programs or to identify areas for program improvement. This has limited the amount of resources available, whether from public or private funding. As the City increases the number of third-party, private technology partnerships, the public realm represents an area ripe for experimentation and research.

Fig 17. (Below) Opening the Edge Ribbon Cutting; Source Tameek Williams



## How

An evaluation tool would allow New York to understand the collective impact of its public realm and better serve residents and producers alike. An initial investment would have enormous downstream benefits. These four steps will set up this recommendation for success:

### 1. Design a cross-sectional advisory board

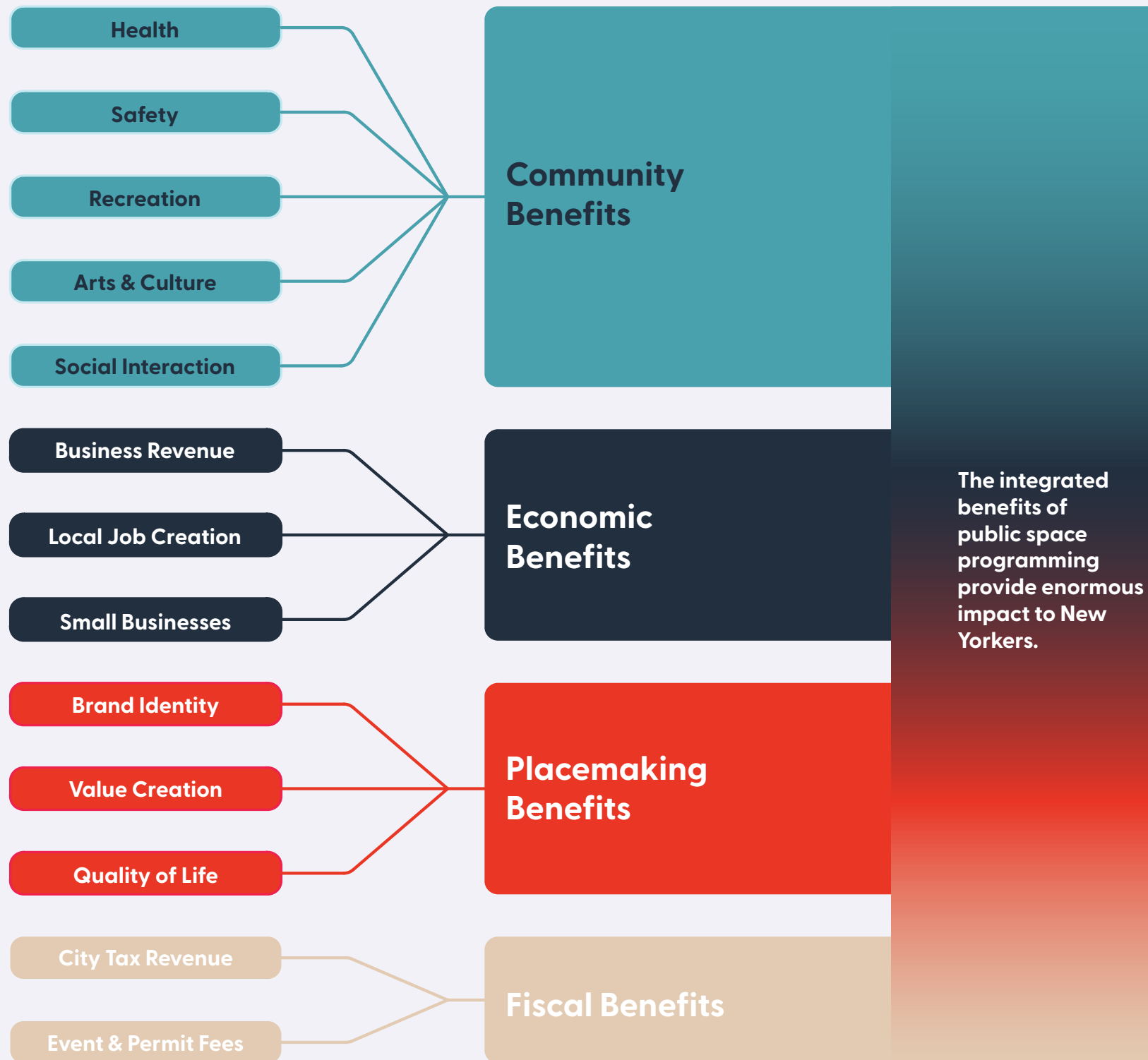
The renewed Mayoral Office (**Rec. One**) should convene a project-based Advisory Board made up of relevant city agency research staff, the City's IT department, the Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity, and other civic, business, and philanthropic organizations. The group could provide targeted input on the goals of the impact evaluation program and identify priority metrics. The group could collect and explore existing research, resources, and data that should be included in the effort. This Advisory Board could identify additional areas for research and evaluation, including the measurement of the shared economic impact of public space programming.

### 2. Develop a programming evaluation framework

The *Untaped* project recommends starting with four key categories of impact measurement: community, placemaking, economic, and fiscal. Within these categories, there are sub-categories, with corresponding metrics, that measure the ways in which public space activations impact the city's overall well-being. This framework provides a shared language for how activations generate qualitative and quantitative impacts, valuable data in advocating for the importance of public space activation. This data would be gathered by a variety of data sources, which include:

**Attendee Intercept Survey:** Attendee intercepts are an essential tool for finding out how participants are engaging in activities and spending associated with public space activations. Surveys also capture attendees' perceptions of the event and characterizations of the neighborhood and public space. Surveys are best issued during the event to reflect a comprehensive sample.

**Business/Vendor Survey:** Business and vendor surveys allow advocates to understand the full picture of how public space activations contribute to revenues, job creation, day-to-day operations, and support for small businesses and entrepreneurship. These surveys are particularly beneficial for activations with a heavy emphasis on businesses and



Public space activations generate impact across four key categories: community, placemaking, economic, and fiscal impacts. Within these categories, there are several sub-categories and metrics that tell a comprehensive story of the ways in which activations impact the city, social infrastructure, and local economy. This framework provides a shared language for how activations generate qualitative and quantitative impacts, valuable data in advocating for the importance and value of public space activation.

**Community Benefits**

The benefits to local neighborhoods that improve residents' quality of life and local amenities.

*Sample Metrics or KPIs: Physical Activity, Access to Fresh Food, Personal/Property Crime, Perceptions of Crime, Recreational Opportunity, Arts Opportunity, Culture Opportunity, Attendance/Demographics, Opportunities to Socialize*

**Economic Benefits**

The additional revenue generated through the event and the event's impact on local businesses.

*Sample Metrics or KPIs: Spending at Businesses, Business Operations, Additional Employment, Small Businesses Support, New Businesses*

**Placemaking Benefits**

Neighborhood character and identity to attract additional economic and community activities.

*Sample Metrics or KPIs: Neighborhood Character, Visitor Attraction, Business Attraction, Built Environment Improvements, Attendee Enjoyment of Event, Novelty and Exposure, Stewardship and Civic Pride*

**Fiscal Benefits**

The ways in which activations contribute to city revenues.

*Sample Metrics or KPIs: Sales Tax, Corporate Income Tax, Personal Income Tax, Hotel Room Occupancy Tax, Event Permitting/Application Fees*

vendors and should be administered following an event.

**Organizer Input:** Organizers can contribute important insights about the offerings at an event. Often, organizers compile findings from event registration and ticketing data, should that be available. Impact takeaways may be top level—like how many people attended the event—but can still provide valuable talking points with limited resource investment.

**Secondary Data Sources:** Secondary data sources are particularly helpful for categories like public safety. Secondary data can also be leveraged using analysis tools like IMPLAN modeling (used for economic impact). Secondary data sources can also help measure long-term impacts (such as property values and safety) for signature and frequent events.

## An evaluation tool would allow New York to understand the collective impact of its public realm and better serve residents and producers.

The metrics identified in the framework should also leverage any existing secondary public data (e.g. Census data, NYC Open Data) and/or proprietary data sources such as Placer.ai, Live XYZ, CoStar, Sprout Social, etc. The public realm stewardship survey should primarily serve to fill in gaps and information that cannot be extracted from existing public and/or proprietary data, and should focus on public space user perception and program partner experience. As such, the design of the survey should follow a thorough audit of existing data collected by or accessible to various city agencies (including data from third-party vendors).

The matrix of event typologies and metric types shows the wide-ranging impacts achieved by common events. Note that although each event has impacts across the full spectrum, organizers usually choose to focus on a few specific types to tell the strongest possible story about their event and because of the resources necessary to conduct these measurements. The kinds of data collected and the means of that collection should be driven by the goals and capacity of the producing entity, which can vary across geography, type, size, and scale.

### 3. Build an open-source and accessible platform

Similar to past citywide program and grant evaluation exercises, the Citywide Impact Evaluation of Public Realm Stewardship should be conducted by independent external evaluation consulting firms or teams of firms selected through a competitive bidding process. The bidding process should consider the expertise and past experience of the vendor in developing program impact studies and perception surveys (including survey administration, survey design, outreach design, and data analysis and reporting), familiarity with research in public space, and technology capabilities to develop a visualization dashboard on existing software such as Tableau, Microsoft Power BI, or others.

Fig 18. (Right) Harlem Silent Disco; Source: Andre Whitehead



The toolkit should be designed with a sense of user engagement in mind. Small, even single-person, organizations should be able to use the survey platform, with limited training and resources. Likewise, researchers or policymakers should have access to rich, vetted data that can speak to the citywide impact of public space programming and activation.

A publicly accessible “impact dashboard” could be created to integrate data into a single site. The dashboard would enable partners to explore various filters (by activation type, by date, by geographic area) and should include an economic impact calculator so that dashboard metrics can be used to produce spend, output, and tax impact figures, enabling policymakers and community partners to calculate return on investment.

In addition to the development of a survey questionnaire on a free and public, interoperable platform, the City, with support of city law, should develop a data sharing agreement that outlines how data collected through the survey will be used, stewardship of the data, and responsibilities and processes for collection, storage, and use of the data to mitigate risks or data breaches.

#### 4. Centralize information on a dashboard

It's unrealistic to assume that every program or activation will be measured by the evaluation platform. To fill gaps in data and information, the City of New York should administer an annual or biannual survey to monitor the perception and attitudes of public space users, to gather annual estimates of spending and programming across organizations, and to analyze which groups are undertaking programming.

The survey should be distributed in partnership with city agencies and community partners through the use of a standardized toolkit of resources that include marketing materials (copy, creative assets); questionnaires (developed on a free, interoperable platform such as Google Forms, and pre-populated with standardized question types organized by category, or shared through a civic data library); training materials (recorded workshops or webinars, checklists); and reporting procedures (recorded workshops or webinars, checklists).

To get started, the City, the Advisory Board, and the renewed Mayor's Office should identify pilot funding to test the evaluation platform, measure effectiveness of the survey, and identify outreach methods. This will set an important baseline by which future results can be measured, build trust amongst stakeholders, and identify hurdles in the implementation of the survey. This exercise could be done before the creation of the full platform, as a research exercise, or after, as a beta test for the larger exercise. The NYC Public Space Stewardship Fund (**Rec. Eight**) could be a partner in this effort, or even a project manager, in order to take some of the burden off of city agencies.

## Precedent

Centralized, tech-enabled evaluation platforms to track and evaluate events and activations exist commercially and are being widely developed and used by private event organizers and venue operators. Platforms and evaluation dashboards such as Tourism Economics' Event Impact Calculator and EventUp's Event Analytics and Reporting software are among existing solutions that enable various users to better understand the returns on investment (ROI) and impacts of public and private ticketed events annually.

These commercial event management and reporting platforms offer customizable dashboards, real-time metrics, automated data integrations, and survey tools that support organizations' continuous learning and evidence-based improvements to events and activations. Among indicators that are typically included in these commercial platforms are: "Total Attendees," "Total Spending by category," "Total Revenue," "Event Marketing Performance," "Average Dwell Time," and "Total Traffic by hour."

While existing evaluation platforms used by private venues and event organizers may prioritize the measurement of impact on sales, revenue, and digital engagement, to demonstrate ROI to sponsors and vendors, it is important that the City of New York expand its focus to operations and broader community and environmental outcomes similar to those outlined in the above framework and that of the Reimagining the Civic Commons (RCC) initiative by Knight Foundation. RCC emphasizes multiple outcome domains including civic engagement, socioeconomic mixing, environmental sustainability, and place value (measured through indicators such as perceptions of safety, and frequency and length of visits).

A citywide platform that marries EventUp-style digital integration and real-time metrics with RCC's expansive measurement lens will not only empower our city agencies and community-based program partners alike to tell data-rich stories of impact, but will also make data collection and analysis scalable, making it easier to compare outcomes across boroughs and over time, and enabling more responsive, equitable policy and programming decisions.

## Recommendation Four

# Targeted User Experience Refinements

## What

The City of New York should undertake targeted, independent UX/UI refinements to its existing E-Apply permitting software and associated informational websites, specifically those managed by SAPO (Street Activity Permit Office) and NYC Parks, to significantly improve accessibility, clarity, and public trust in the permitting process.

While each UX issue in isolation may appear minor, together they create a user experience that feels outdated, tedious, and confusing, deterring many applicants from pursuing public space activations altogether. Addressing these issues collectively through targeted, data-driven design interventions can substantially modernize how people perceive and engage with city permitting systems.

## Why It Matters

Navigating New York City’s digital permitting systems is a well-documented pain point for community partners, artists, and civic organizations looking to host public space activations. Information is fragmented, difficult to locate, and presented in ways that do not align with how events are actually planned, especially for applicants relying primarily on mobile devices. Users routinely encounter broken links, unclear form fields, contradictory instructions, and little explanation for why certain questions are being asked. These cumulative micro-barriers reinforce a perception of bureaucracy as exclusionary and create an uneven playing field that privileges organizations with dedicated administrative capacity or prior experience.

Improving usability, accessibility, and transparency in these systems is therefore not just a technical or aesthetic upgrade, it is an equity intervention. Targeted UX/UI refinements would make the permitting process more intuitive, predictable, and trustworthy. Applicants would benefit from clearer guidance and more consistent timelines, while agencies would see fewer user errors, reduced help desk volume, and faster, more consistent review processes. Over time, the platform will become more agile, easier to maintain, and more reflective of the diverse civic life it is meant to support.

**Fig 19.** (Below) Turnout Queensboro Dance Festival; Source: Design Trust for Public Space



## How

Modernizing these interfaces signals that New York is investing in itself. A refreshed permitting experience will become part of a broader commitment to high-quality digital and public infrastructure: tools that are modern, easy to use, visually coherent, and reflective of the city’s cultural vibrancy. This positions New York not only as a leader in public realm policy, but also in government technology and design excellence.

### 1. Conduct comprehensive UX/UI audits and prioritize fixes

The first step toward improving the permitting experience is to understand the user journey in greater detail. The City should commission an independent UX/UI and accessibility audit, ideally led by a civic-tech incubator or university design lab such as Civic Hall, Parsons, or CUNY TechWorks. This audit would document pain points across SAPO and Parks’ permitting platforms, identifying areas where technical issues, like malfunctioning tooltips, broken calendar widgets, or unclear navigation, compound the difficulty of submitting applications.

Mobile-first accessibility should be a priority. Many community partners and smaller organizations rely primarily on smartphones to interact with city systems, yet the permitting portals are not optimized for mobile screens or assistive technologies. The audit should therefore include testing with screen readers, translation tools, and low-bandwidth devices to ensure compliance with WCAG 2.2 AA standards.

Once the findings are gathered, the City should establish a prioritization framework that categorizes fixes according to user impact, frequency, and technical effort, identifying quick wins (like clarifying tooltips or fixing save states) alongside more complex improvements (such as adding estimated processing timelines). Rather than attempting a complete overhaul at once, improvements should be implemented in quarterly design sprints, enabling iterative updates and transparent communication of progress to the public. This incremental, agile approach ensures steady improvement while minimizing service disruptions.

Based on the existing research by the *Untaped* initiative, early areas for improvement include the following:

- Creation of a design system (including color, typeface, sizing, hierarchy, amount of info per page, interaction, spacing, etc.)

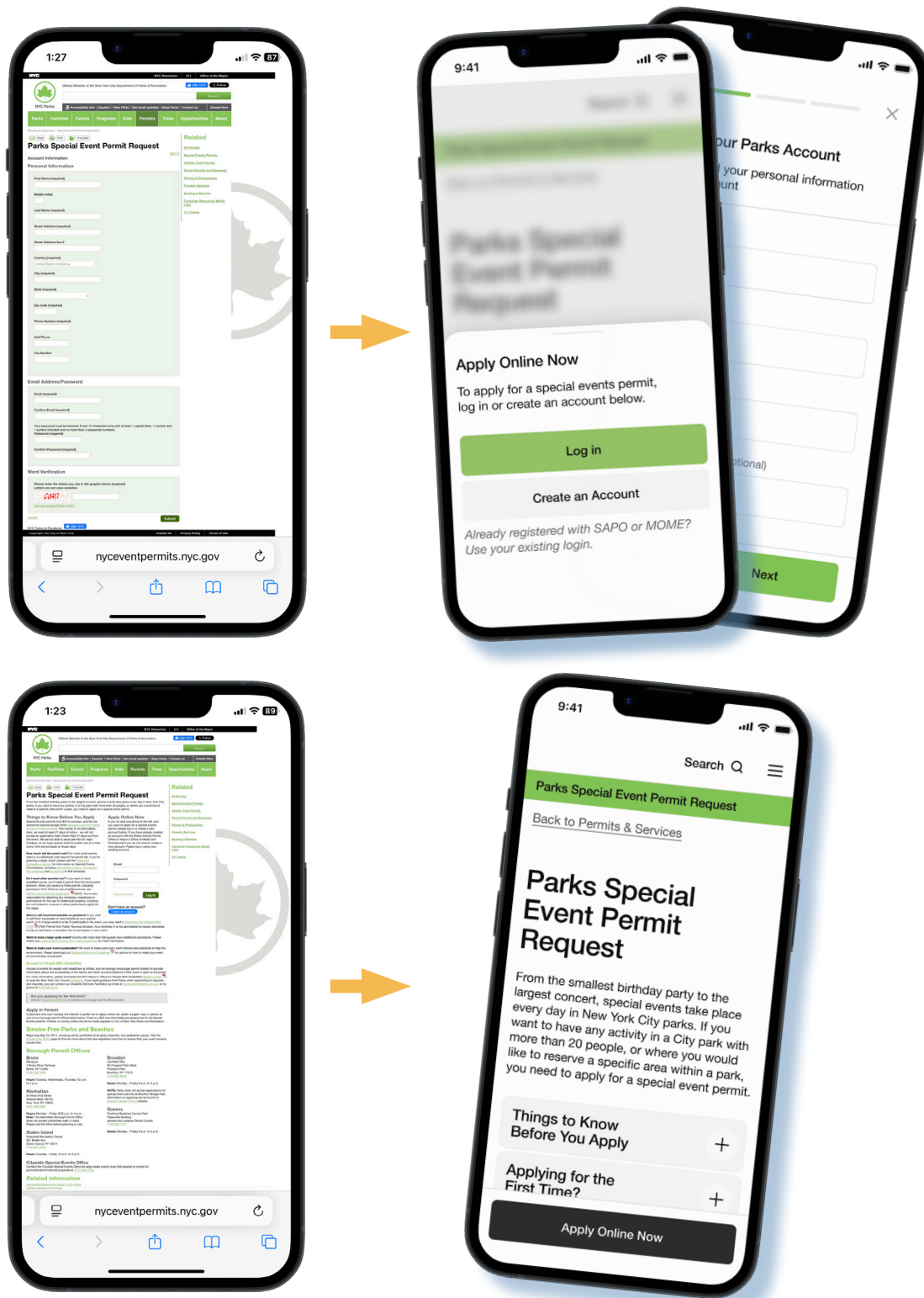


Fig 20. (Left) User registration experience currently and potential new platforms that modernize the system

Targeted UX/UI Refinements

- that informs the design and information display of informational permitting pages.
- Fix recurring calendar and tooltip bugs that interfere with submission accuracy.
- Add contextual explanations for each question in the application (e.g., why specific data is required).
- Use plain, accessible language in all forms and automated communications.
- Display estimated application timelines by event type to set realistic expectations.
- Improve saved status, enabling users to pause and resume applications seamlessly.
- Implement step-specific feedback functions instead of one global comment form.
- Conduct a comprehensive accessibility and mobile performance audit to meet WCAG 2.2 AA standards.
- Improve mobile optimization and visual hierarchy for easy navigation.
- Add contextual images, diagrams, and descriptive examples (e.g., annotated event diagrams, case studies).
- Surface key content through dynamic FAQs and quick-start modules rather than static text blocks.

While not exhaustive, this list represents relatively easy fixes to address the permitting process’s digital journey. NYC Parks is already investing in a new portal in partnership with CECM that addresses many of these improvements. This work could serve as an early proof of concept that informs a citywide approach towards permits.

2. Redesign content architecture for clarity

Beyond technical fixes, the City must address the deeper issue of content design and navigation. The permitting process currently overwhelms users with dense information presented in fragmented, text-heavy pages. A redesign should start by reorganizing content around user intent, prioritizing “what applicants need to know now”: required steps, timelines, costs, and points of contact.

Visual hierarchy and content clarity are critical. Pages should include diagrams, infographics, and annotated case studies showing the types of events covered, what permits they require, and what documentation is necessary. Collaborating with communication design specialists, the City should conduct a plain-language rewrite of existing forms and web copy, transforming technical and legal text into clear, approachable language without sacrificing precision.

Fig 21. (Left) Information sources that are not geared towards mobile and potential UX designs for alternatives.



Fig 22. (Left) Turnout NYC Event at Uptown Grand Central, Harlem Silent Disco; Source: Andre Whitehead

The E-Apply platform should incorporate contextual help features, tooltips, expandable “Why we ask this” boxes, and step-by-step guidance, so that applicants understand the purpose behind each question. Providing estimated processing times for each application type would also set realistic expectations, reducing applicant anxiety and follow-up inquiries. These changes, though small in isolation, collectively represent a cultural shift toward treating permitting as a public service rather than a bureaucratic obstacle.

### 3. Prototype, test, and sustain through civic tech infrastructure

Modernization is most effective when grounded in evidence and iteration. The City should begin by developing interactive prototypes, for example, using Figma or similar platforms, to visualize proposed improvements to the E-Apply system. These prototypes can be tested directly with end users, including community organizers, artists, and small business owners, to gather real-time feedback before implementation.

Once core features are validated, the City should launch a beta version of E-Apply that incorporates embedded feedback loops. Instead of a single, global “feedback” button, users should be able to comment on specific steps or questions in the process, creating actionable data for designers and developers. The City should complement this with a public transparency dashboard, similar to NYC Open Data, showing progress on bug fixes, accessibility enhancements, and response times to user reports.

Finally, sustaining these improvements will require stable funding and dedicated staff. The City should create a sustainability plan that secures ongoing maintenance resources through a combination of operating budget allocations, philanthropic support, and public-private partnerships. Coordination with the Mayor’s Office (**Rec. One**) could ensure that UX improvements for permitting align with broader goals for transparency and accessibility in the public space management ecosystem.

### 4. Renew systems design as an essential city service

Sustaining high-quality digital services requires ongoing stewardship, not just one-time fixes. The City must invest in design and accessibility expertise as a core competency within government. This means hiring or contracting UX researchers, content strategists, and accessibility specialists, not just software developers, to ensure that quality is maintained beyond the initial upgrade. The City should consider reinvo-

rating its Service Design Studio, or broadening its mandate, to provide leadership over this and a number of other UX/UI challenges facing the city. Currently situated within the Mayors' Office for Economic Opportunity, this studio could step up in an important moment and provide needed creativity and human-centered design.

## Improving usability, accessibility, and transparency in these systems is not just a technical or aesthetic upgrade, it is an equity intervention.

Additional leadership should come from the Office of Technology and Innovation (OTI), which should assume the role of citywide UX governance body. OTI can ensure consistent design standards across agencies and develop a unified design system: a shared library of components, icons, and interaction models that create visual and functional consistency across all public-facing city services. This approach, modeled after successful examples like San Francisco's Department of Digital Services, would lay the groundwork for broader modernization across municipal platforms, starting with permitting.

In parallel, the City should build partnerships with local universities and design programs to establish pathway fellowships and internships in civic technology. Programs through institutions like CUNY, Pratt, Cornell Tech, or NYU could give students hands-on experience improving municipal digital services while providing the city with fresh talent and ongoing research capacity.

## Precedent

### **Boston's Permitting Modernization Initiative**

Boston's permitting modernization effort addressed UX barriers in permitting systems across city government. Under Mayor Michelle Wu's administration, Boston established permitting reform as a key priority, organizing efforts around "no wrong door" and "tell us once" principles that reduce redundancy and improve user experience across multiple city departments.

Boston's approach combines immediate tactical fixes with longer-term infrastructure investments. The city created multilingual guides such as "Navigating the Permitting Process" that use plain language, visual diagrams, and step-by-step instructions to demystify requirements for first-time applicants. The Inspectional Services Department implemented a Fast Track program that guarantees seven-day approvals for eligible permits, setting clear expectations and reducing applicant anxiety about processing timelines.

Boston embedded these improvements within broader governance reforms. A Technology Modernization Executive Order formalized cross-agency coordination and established sustained funding for digital service improvements. The city government has prioritized mobile optimization, accessibility compliance, and iterative feedback collection, recognizing that modernization is an ongoing process rather than a one-time project.

## Recommendation Five

# One-Stop Shop

## What

The City of New York should launch a single, mobile-friendly, centralized website that consolidates every step and resource required to plan and permit public-space activations. Designed as a clear, contemporary, and multilingual experience, this “one-stop shop” would let applicants understand what permits they need, when to apply, what it costs, and how to comply, without having to navigate multiple agency sites or rely on too much staff intervention.

## Why It Matters

New York City’s permitting process for public space activations is fragmented across multiple agencies, each with its own requirements, terminology, and digital platforms. Applicants often don’t know where to begin or which permits they need, leading to delays, confusion, and missed opportunities. The system relies on desktop-era interfaces and inconsistent guidance, which is especially challenging for grassroots organizers, small businesses, and artists who primarily use mobile devices and may not have administrative support.

This fragmentation reinforces inequities: those with prior experience or institutional resources can navigate the process, while smaller community-led groups face disproportionate burdens. Meanwhile, applicants experience public space as a shared civic resource, not as a set of agency silos. The current permitting ecosystem does not reflect that reality. A centralized, mobile-first one-stop portal would provide clear starting points, consistent language, and streamlined workflows. This reduces search time and user error, speeds up approvals, and allows agency staff to focus on safety and coordination rather than troubleshooting. It also expands who can confidently access and animate public space, particularly BIPOC-led and emerging organizations.

Crucially, this is also an investment in New York’s digital public infrastructure. A modern, intuitive, and visually coherent platform signals that the City is committed to equitable access, design excellence, and the everyday dignity of those who steward public life. By prioritizing usability, not just compliance, the City can strengthen trust, broaden participation, and support a more vibrant and inclusive public realm.

**Fig 23.** (Below) New York City Open Street; Source: NYC Department of Transportation



## How

Implementing the one-stop shop will require coordinated delivery of user-centered design, inter-agency policy alignment, and sustainable operations. To deliver a functional one-stop shop, the City must actively coordinate user-centered design, inter-agency policy alignment, and long-term operational ownership. The City should prioritize the four considerations below:

### 1. Build a mobile-first and accessible user experience

The City’s first priority should be to center user experience and accessibility. The new portal should implement the targeted design improvements identified in the UX/UI Improvements initiative (**Rec. Four**), including guided intake flows, plain-language content, and cost and lead time calculators. These refinements will ensure applicants can clearly see the path from idea to permit, whether they are organizing a small neighborhood fair or a large public concert.

This requires building, governing, and maintaining a centralized digital platform that does the following:

- Permit Navigator (“Get Started” funnel): This might include: guided questions that route users to the correct path (e.g., SAPO vs. Parks vs. DOT), surface requirements at the right time, and generate a tailored checklist of documents, fees, insurance, access routes, and lead times.
- Permit matrix and case studies: Side-by-side comparisons of common event types and rules (e.g. markets, performances, pop-ups, block parties) showing which permits are required, typical timelines, ADA considerations, when vending sales or ticketed event components shift an activation into separate regulatory pathways, and real examples with diagrams and/or photos.
- Calendar and funding hub: Key dates, blackout periods, processing windows, and funding opportunities (e.g. micro-grants, matching grants), with reminders and alerts.
- Application tools: Save-and-resume, status tracking, email/SMS notifications, fee calculators, printable PDFs, plain-language templates (e.g. site plan, insurance COI guidance, vending and concession guidance), and data collection prompts for post-event

reporting.

- APIs and integrations: Connections to agency systems for status updates; optional integration with the Public Space Event Stager (**Rec. Six**) to attach compliant site plans; alignment with the Stewardship Fund (**Rec. Seven**) to pre-screen for grant eligibility.
- Accessibility and trust: WCAG 2.2 AA compliance, mobile optimization, multilingual content, plain-language guides, and transparent policy references.

A key feature of this new system should be a Permit Navigator, a decision-tree tool that asks short, non-technical questions, such as event type, attendance, location, and activities, and outputs the exact permits required, along with deadlines, fees, and insurance needs. By translating complex regulatory frameworks into clear, conversational guidance, the Navigator would make permitting legible to first-time and grassroots organizers. This Navigator will be mutually supported by the Tiered Permitting Rubric (**Rec. Two**); applicants can be guided to programming changes that move them to easier tiers, saving them time and money.

To maintain long-term usability, the City should also develop a shared design system and content style guide. This will ensure that as agencies update their individual web pages or forms, the user experience remains consistent across platforms, devices, and languages.

## 2. Align data and content across agencies

The success of the One-Stop Digital Shop will depend on alignment across multiple city agencies. The City should establish a cross-agency content council, composed of new and existing public agency stewards from SAPO, Parks, DOT, DCLA, FDNY, and NYPD, to maintain a single source of truth for permit definitions and identify when they trigger separate requirements, fee tables, lead times, and blackout dates. This council would prevent outdated or contradictory information from circulating between agencies, a major current pain point for applicants.

Where possible, the portal should expose real-time status updates via APIs, allowing applicants to track their applications without relying on manual email correspondence. The system should also integrate with the Public Space Event Stager (**Rec. Six**), allowing users to attach dimensioned, compliant site plans that automatically validate basic safety and accessibility criteria.

Finally, the portal should embody policy transparency. Each requirement, whether for insurance, lead time, or noise control, should be accompanied by plain-language explanations and “what changed” notes when rules are updated. This clarity transforms the permitting system from a gatekeeping mechanism into an educational resource for the public.

## New York City’s permitting process for public space activations is fragmented across multiple agencies, each with its own requirements, terminology, and digital platforms.

### 3. Deliver performance through public-private partnership

Implementation should follow a build-operate partnership model, combining the city’s leadership with private sector technical expertise. A core municipal product team, consisting of product managers, UX designers, engineers, and content specialists, should work alongside a civic-tech vendor during the build phase to ensure that institutional knowledge remains within city government.

Funding should come from a hybrid model that blends city operational funds with philanthropic or corporate social responsibility (CSR) support. This approach has precedent in digital equity initiatives and ensures that improvements can continue beyond the initial rollout. The Public Space Stewardship Fund (**Rec. Eight**) could provide complementary support by underwriting applicant training sessions and micro-grants to offset small permitting costs.

To manage risk and scale efficiently, the City should take a phased approach: the first phase would launch a unified front door that routes users to existing agency systems while offering timelines and navigational guidance; the second phase would integrate deeper API connections, dashboards, and payment capabilities.

### 4. Provide a roadmap for continuous iteration

A major determinant of success will be the City’s ability to sustain and iterate the platform. The rollout should include training and support for community-based users, with short tutorials, office hours, and video walkthroughs for BIDs, cultural councils, and neighborhood groups.

The system should embed feedback loops at every level, enabling users to comment on specific steps or submit post-permit surveys. This data should feed into an internal continuous improvement roadmap that is publicly visible, ensuring accountability.

Finally, the City should publish equity dashboards tracking key performance indicators such as time-to-approval, mobile performance, language accessibility, and the participation rate of first-time applicants. This transparency will demonstrate progress and ensure that the permitting portal evolves as a living public service, responsive to community needs and technological change.

Fig 24. (Below) Neighborhood Commons Brownsville activation with Caribeing; Source: Design Trust for Public Space



## Precedent

The City of Boston's public space special events portal, which provides applicants with a clear, step-by-step pathway for hosting events in parks, plazas, and streets. Rather than requiring organizers to already know which permits they need, the site asks simple up-front questions about event size, activities, location, and footprint, and then automatically directs applicants to the correct processes and forms. It consolidates timelines, insurance requirements, departmental reviews, and contact information in one place, making it easier for both new and recurring organizers to understand expectations and prepare accordingly.

The portal is written in accessible language, visually organized, and designed to reduce guesswork, helping applicants plan confidently and allowing officials to review applications more efficiently. A New York City one-stop permitting site could adapt this model to local agency structures and community needs, ensuring that public space activation feels approachable, navigable, and aligned with the City's broader goals for equity and cultural life.

## Recommendation Six

# “Space Stager” Public Space Digital Mapping

## What

New York City should establish a public space mapping tool, an interactive digital platform designed to transform the way public space activations are planned, permitted, and managed. The tool would function as a citywide public programming atlas, merging the real-time collaborative features of platforms like Miro or Canvas with the mapping power of OpenStreetMap and ZoLa NYC.

By centralizing a comprehensive inventory of public spaces, including detailed street-level data such as fire hydrants, sidewalk widths, street trees, bike lanes, and bus stops, the tool would allow organizers, community groups, and agencies to collaboratively visualize site layouts, overlay infrastructure layers, measure distances, and annotate plans. Final plans could then be archived and made publicly accessible, ensuring both institutional memory and greater transparency across neighborhoods.

## Why It Matters

Organizing events in New York City’s public spaces currently requires navigating complex permitting expectations, including producing detailed site plans, documenting fixed infrastructure, and demonstrating emergency access routes. These technical requirements often demand drawing, mapping, and spatial planning skills that many grassroots and under-resourced groups simply do not have. As a result, the ability to activate parks, plazas, and streets is uneven, privileging organizations with professional support and limiting cultural expression and visibility in communities that already face resource disparities.

A shared, intuitive Event Stager tool would lower these barriers by standardizing information across agencies and providing collaborative planning features that make it possible to meet compliance requirements without specialized technical training. It would also streamline agency review, reducing delays and administrative back-and-forth.

Importantly, by archiving event layouts and making records accessible over time, the tool would strengthen institutional memory and public accountability. Communities will gain visibility into what has been done before, and will be able to reuse or adapt successful layouts and engage as equal partners in shaping public space, not just applicants seeking permission.

**Fig 25.** (Below) Bathgate Avenue Open Street in the Bronx; Source: NYC Department of Transportation



## How

Implementing the Public Space Event Stager will require strong cross-agency coordination, data transparency, and investment in digital infrastructure. While this recommendation calls for technological and policy innovation, it does not demand a complete overhaul of existing systems; rather, it aligns and strengthens them under a unified framework. The following considerations should guide its development and implementation:

### 1. Conduct a citywide data audit and standardization process

Before development begins, the City should undertake a comprehensive audit of existing physical and geographic public space datasets. Agencies such as DOT, Parks, SAPO, and DCLA maintain separate databases of infrastructure, permitting, and assets, often in incompatible formats. This audit would identify overlaps, gaps, and redundancies, creating a unified and standardized dataset that includes elements like sidewalk widths, hydrant and utilities locations, vegetation, and past event records. A single data schema will create enormous benefits, updated dynamically as new events are permitted. Standardization would not only streamline permitting but also enable the City to analyze patterns in public space use, helping inform broader urban design and equity strategies.

### 2. Design and test the digital platform

Once the data foundation is established, the City should develop a prototype of the Event Stager platform: an interactive, citywide map that merges real-time collaboration (like Miro) with open-source mapping (like OpenStreetMap or ZoLa). The tool would allow users to visualize public spaces, overlay infrastructure layers, measure distances, and plan event layouts collaboratively, including elements like temporary seating, tables, stages, street vending tents, and equipment. Users would be able to design and configure their public program in the same way that they might move through Google Maps or order an Uber.

The City should partner with universities, civic-tech organizations, and design firms to ensure the tool’s accessibility, usability, and visual clarity. Pilot testing should take place in a few representative neighborhoods and with a diversity of organizational scales and types. Feedback from both city staff and local organizers should guide iterative improvements before scaling citywide. The prototype phase is an opportunity

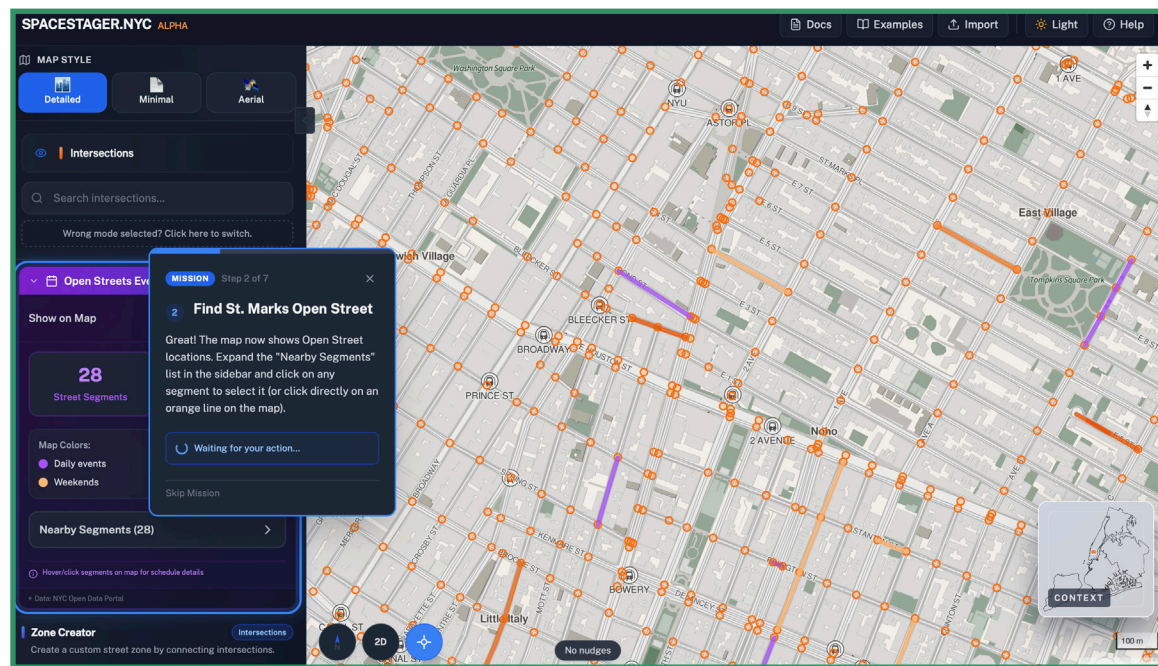


Fig 26. (Above) The Spacestager prototype draws on existing spatial databases to create custom site plans.

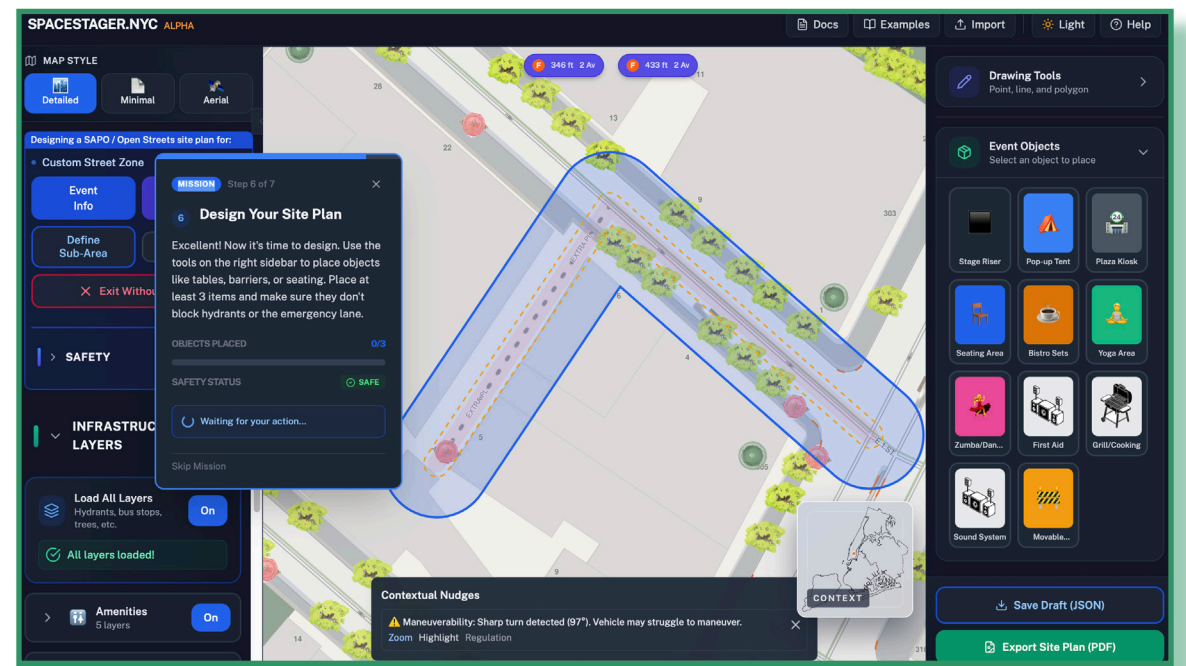
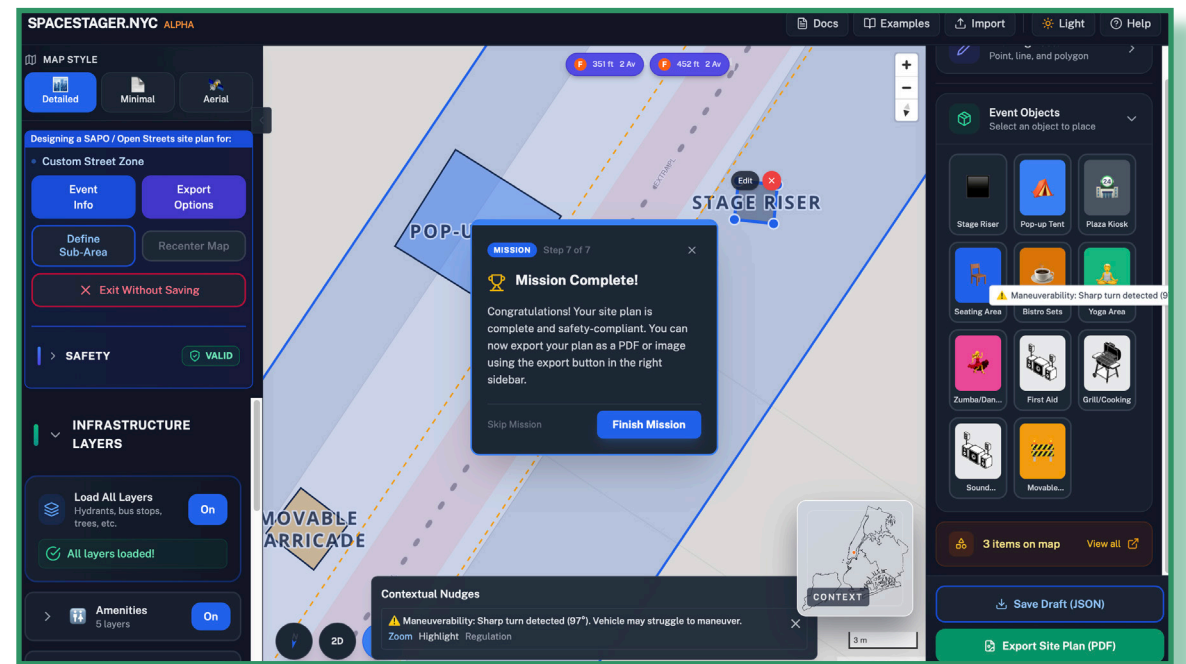
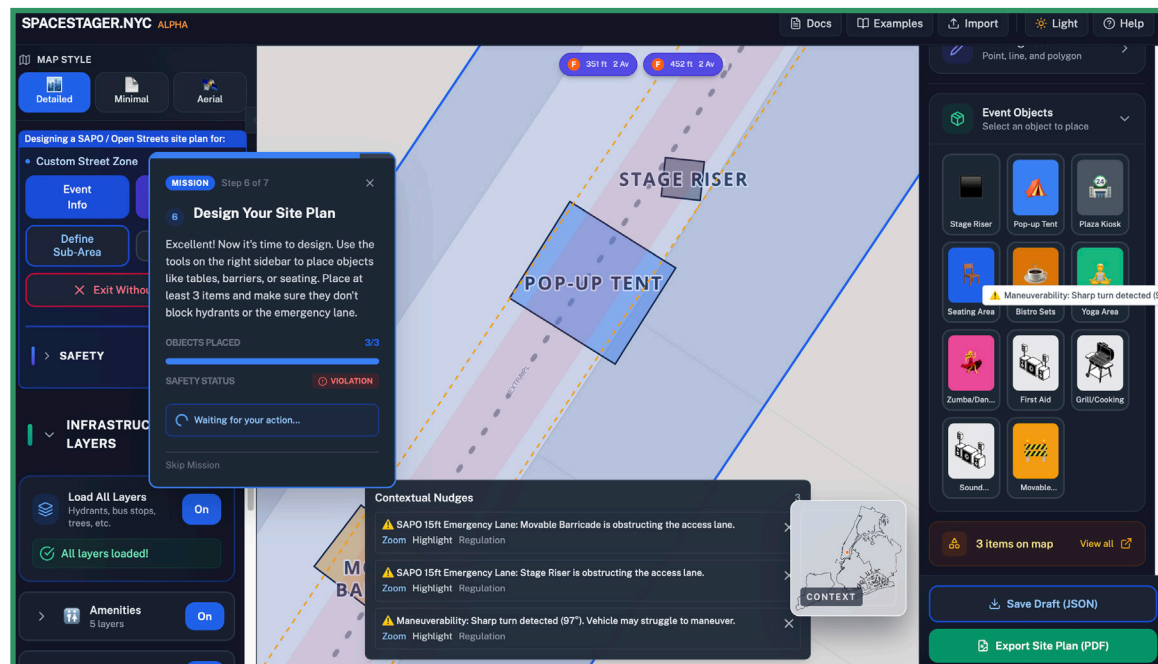


Fig 28. (Above) Spacestager allows for the automatic inclusion of existing site information, such as trees, fire hydrants, and utilities.

Fig 27. (Below) Spacestager can allow for easy mapping of a NYC Open Street or other street activity, offering contextual nudges and insight along the way.

Fig 29. (Below) Spacestager allows for saving events for future reference, exporting site plans, and collaborative working models.



to demonstrate that good design, grounded in equity and practicality, can make permitting more transparent, not more complex.

### 3. Align the tool with institutional policies

The Event Stager's long-term success will depend on strong governance and user education. Embedding the tool within the new Mayor's Office (**Rec. One**) would give it a stable institutional home, ensuring coordination between SAPO, DOT, Parks, and other agencies. A strong partnership with OTI would maintain its long-term functionality.

The City should also develop a training program for users, both agency staff and community groups, so that everyone can access and use the platform effectively. Aligning permitting policies and data-sharing agreements is essential to ensure that all relevant agencies can both contribute to and draw from the system. The governance framework should also include clear privacy protocols to safeguard sensitive data while preserving transparency in public decision-making.

### 4. Evaluate and sustain the tool over time

For the Public Space Event Stager to be effective over time, the City must treat it as living infrastructure requiring continual investment and adaptation. Sustaining it will require dedicated funding for server maintenance, feature updates, and user support. The City should explore public-private partnerships to either supplement the capacity for the Stager tool, or to potentially own and manage the back end of the site, with a universal city contract.

Evaluation over time should focus on measurable outcomes: reductions in permitting time, increased collaboration between agencies, and higher numbers of public space activations across boroughs. Regular user feedback, through surveys, workshops, and public design sessions, should inform continuous improvements. The Event Stager's ultimate value lies in its adaptability: it will succeed if it becomes a shared civic tool that grows with the communities and agencies that use it.

Additionally, there are a number of other use cases to adapt the tool, should it prove successful. A similar tool could be created to help manage the outdoor dining program, giving restaurant owners a simpler way to communicate with city staff about their designs, or it could help coordinate less complex site-based construction projects.

## Precedent

Models already exist demonstrating how spatial transparency and mapping tools can support city agencies and community users. Platforms like OpenStreetMap show how collaboratively maintained base maps provide accurate, open-source spatial context; ZoLa NYC illustrates how layered zoning and land-use information can be presented in clear, toggleable formats; and ChiStreetWork (Chicago) offers a centralized interface for tracking street closures and planned public right-of-way use.

Commercial event planning platforms show that this functionality adds value for cities and users. Iventis, used by major international events including the 2022 Commonwealth Games and the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), provides collaborative visual mapping that enables multiple stakeholders to work simultaneously on event plans. Users upload CAD drawings, place infrastructure with centimeter accuracy on satellite maps, and generate 3D visualizations. OnePlan, used by over 50,000 events worldwide, offers similar functionality optimized for community-scale events. Built on Esri's ArcGIS platform, OnePlan allows governments to digitize event planning with accurate geospatial data for mapping infrastructure and emergency access.

A New York City Public Space Event Stager could integrate these strengths into a single, interactive platform combining open-source mapping foundations with professional-grade collaboration features, making sophisticated site planning accessible to all organizers regardless of technical expertise or organizational capacity.

## Recommendation Seven

# Seasonal Activation Partner Permit

## What

The City of New York should establish a Seasonal Activation Partner Permit (SAPP), a streamlined, medium-term permitting mechanism that allows qualified community partners, cultural organizations, local nonprofits, and small business alliances to repeatedly activate public spaces over the course of a defined season and within defined parameters, without having to reapply for individual permits for each event.

## Why It Matters

Community organizations, neighborhood associations, and local cultural groups often run recurring public space events that are essential to neighborhood life. Yet each activation, even when it is identical to a previously approved one, requires reapplying, repaying fees, resubmitting insurance, and undergoing a full review. This redundant process creates unnecessary financial strain and administrative labor for both applicants and agency staff. Groups that have repeatedly demonstrated strong stewardship are still forced to start from zero every season, often facing inconsistent requirements and timelines depending on who reviews their application. The result is confusion, inequity, and a system that discourages long-term community programming.

Requiring a separate permit for each event makes scheduling difficult, as the public space programming confronts the dynamics of the real world. Weather unpredictability is an enormous challenge; a single day of rain can cancel months of preparation, costing organizers permit fees, deposits, and momentum. As permits do not allow for flexibility because of a weather event, many community groups simply cannot absorb the financial risk, discouraging them from activating public spaces at all. Groups that schedule repeat events throughout the year and/or annually must deal with archaic grandfathering of historic events and confusion when external factors, such as artist schedules or third-party vendors, force date shifts that they cannot accommodate without additional permitting.

**Fig 30.** (Below) Brownsville Community Justice Center open mic afternoon; Source: SITU



## How

A Seasonal Activation Partner Permit (SAPP) would mitigate these structural barriers by creating a predictable, trust-based pathway for recurring events. It would allow qualifying partners to renew or modify approved event plans with minimal friction, stabilizing costs and allowing for flexible weather options. Rather than treating each activation as a one-off transaction, the City would recognize recurring events as ongoing civic infrastructure, worthy of consistent support, streamlined processes, and shared responsibility.

The SAPP would be a new permit type that would apply across all public space typologies and boroughs (or it could start in a trial period with more limited purview), expanding beyond the limited frameworks of existing plaza partners, Open Streets, or park conservancies. A SAPP would grant a pre-approved partner permission to host recurring or flexible programming in designated spaces during a set seasonal window (e.g., May–August or November–January) under agreed-upon parameters of duration, number of activations (including proposed dates), location and footprint size, insurance requirements, and types of activities (e.g., vending, amplified sound, or performances). The permit should also codify the process for renewal, allowing returning partners in good standing to reaffirm their prior-season compliance rather than starting from scratch. In order to develop the SAPP, the following process is recommended.

### 1. Design the policy and eligibility framework

At the core of the Seasonal Activation Partner Permit is the need for a predictable and transparent structure that recognizes trusted community partners as capable stewards of public space. The City, including the Law Department and Comptroller's Office, should begin by establishing clear eligibility criteria, initially focusing on proven plaza partners, Open Streets organizations, and nonprofits with a track record of successful activations. Existing legal structures, such as sole source license agreements, could be evaluated as a potential model or as the foundation for an expanded program. Over time, eligibility can expand to include new community-based organizations that demonstrate local benefit or emerging leadership capacity. By codifying these elements—eligibility, structure, renewals, and weather flexibility—the City would establish a permitting system that builds stability, rewards good stewardship, and expands equitable access to activation opportunities.

## 2. Centralize coordination

A successful SAPP will also require a unified permitting body that links all relevant agencies (**Rec. One**) and presents a single, intelligible interface for applicants (**Rec. Five**). The City should integrate the program into the proposed One-Stop Permitting Portal to create a centralized and transparent application system. Through this digital infrastructure, partner organizations could submit a single seasonal application, track approval progress, and update scheduling information without duplicating paperwork across SAPO, DOT, Parks, and other agencies.

## 3. Implement and operationalize

To formalize and operationalize this permit, the City should issue a city-wide directive from the Mayor's Office that clearly establishes the SAPP framework, including parameters for duration, renewal, insurance, and coordination. The directive would unify disparate agency policies and create a consistent standard for recurring public space activations.

Importantly, the SAPP would enable select applicants to identify alternative dates in the case of cancellations due to weather (as long as rescheduled events maintain agreed-upon parameters of scale, timing, and safety and are held during the set seasonal window). Rain dates should be piloted for activations that fall under higher Event Tiers (**Rec. Two**), i.e. events that may anticipate large attendance, require larger footprints, or have longer duration.

The City should also explore partnerships and resources that help establish these recurring partnerships, as many groups will be new to longer-term relationships with the City. This could be financially supported through partnerships with the Public Space Stewardship Fund (**Rec. Eight**), which would provide grants or matching support for community.

## 4. Evaluate over time

To ensure the Seasonal Activation Partner Permit is equitable, effective, and sustainable, the City should begin with limited pilot programs, either starting with a smaller geographic zone or identifying a handful of pilot partners. These pilots would test efficiency and user experience.

Once established, the permit could evolve to include hybrid programming models (indoor-outdoor, digital-physical), collaborative events across multiple partners, and neighborhood-based activation zones that further decentralize decision-making. Taken together, these steps would transform the City's approach to recurring public space activation, from a transactional permitting system to a partnership-based model grounded in trust, flexibility, and community stewardship.

**Fig 31.** (Pg. 94-95) Union Square Greenmarket; Source: Uptown Phil Roeder

## Precedent

### New York City Farmers Market Permit

New York City's farmers' markets show how innovative legal structures can support recurring community activations. This includes the Greenmarket program, operated by GrowNYC since 1976, which operates as a sole-source concession. While different in its legal structure, length, and geography, this precedent affirms the core principle behind the Seasonal Activation Partner: certain trusted community partners could benefit by not reapplying for identical activations each time they occur.

These farmers markets' concession agreements dramatically reduce administrative burden for both organizers and city agencies. Rather than processing 50+ individual applications for a weekly summer market, the City processes one application covering the entire season. The predictable fee structure allows farmers and market managers to budget accurately, removing financial uncertainty.

Most importantly, the Greenmarket model has proven sustainable at scale. GrowNYC operates 45+ locations citywide, serving over 200 regional farmers across all five boroughs. The program's 50-year longevity demonstrates that seasonal permits can maintain public safety and quality standards while dramatically simplifying recurring activations. The Seasonal Activation Partner Permit could extend this proven framework to other types of community-led public space programming, from cultural performances to neighborhood gatherings.



## Recommendation Eight

# NYC Public Space Stewardship Fund

## What

The City of New York should work with the philanthropic and civic communities to establish a NYC Public Space Stewardship Fund, a private 501(c)3 that can raise money from multiple sources, including public grants, municipal allocations, philanthropic contributions, corporate donations and partnerships, and grassroots fundraising. These resources can nimbly support under-resourced community groups, cultural organizations, and small-scale public space stewards with a combination of technical and financial resources. This organization can interface with trusted agency partners in tackling needs that the City can't, for legal or structural reasons.

## Why It Matters

Communities are constantly in search of funding and volunteer support to execute activations. Many community-based organizations attribute programming challenges to operating with extremely limited staff, time, and cash flow, while being asked to front costs for permits, insurance, site plans, artist fees, and equipment, often months before reimbursement (typical for government grants). As such, flexible funding mechanisms through a nonprofit intermediary may allow organizations to cover insurance, permit fees, and deposits; pay artists and vendors on time; and move forward with programming even when city permitting timelines are unclear or delayed.

New York already has a number of “Fund of” organizations and nonprofits that work in this space. While this recommendation encourages a field scan to ensure that a new organization isn’t competing for dollars or duplicating efforts, it is supported by a clear need for resources in community-based organizations, especially in new areas of innovation for the city, like Open Streets and outdoor dining. NYC Parks has a handful of organizations, like the City Parks Foundation/Partnership for Parks, that have a mandate to support work in its purview. These partners should be seen as models for learning, adaptation, and potential growth, as we define the city’s public realm more broadly. Additionally, the Urban Design Forum and ANHD have been leading the advocacy for a very similar idea for years, demonstrating a shared commitment to fill a gap of important need.

Fig 32. (Below) "Les Diamants" by Perseides Studio from QDS International; Source: Art Partners



## These partners should be seen as models for learning, adaptation, and potential growth, as we define the city’s public realm more broadly.

Governance should include a diverse board of representatives from city agencies, community-based organizations, cultural institutions, and civic advocates. This diversity ensures that funding and support reflects the full spectrum of NYC’s public space users. The board should operate under a well-defined charter and set of bylaws, paired with other appropriate governance documents such as a set of financial policies. The Fund’s mission should center equity, prioritizing historically under-resourced neighborhoods and supporting organizations that have been excluded from traditional funding streams.

### 2. Design inclusive program

The Fund should be designed to lower barriers and build capacity. Examples of resources that could be provided include, but are not limited to:

## How

The NYC Public Space Stewardship Fund would be designed to have a broad remit, one that could change over time as needs evolved. This is purposeful, as successful public private partnerships exist so that the private partner can be flexible and responsive to community needs. In order to jump-start the Stewardship Fund, the following steps should be taken:

### 1. Establish the entity’s governance framework

The independent, nonprofit Stewardship Fund should be created by a partnership between the City of New York and existing nonprofits with sectoral expertise. A number of successful models exist, which should be studied for their legal structure, programs, and impacts. Likely, the Fund would exist as a 501(c)(3) that operates as a long-term vehicle for supporting public realm programming, maintenance, and activation. The organization could have a formal public-private partnership overlay, coordinated by a license or contractual agreement, which would give the organization more power to work and speak on behalf of city priorities. The City would provide legitimacy and oversight, while private and philanthropic partners contribute funding and technical expertise.

Fig 33. (Pg. 92-93) Turnout NYC Event, Roller Jam 2021; Source: Uptown Grand Central



- Low-barrier, rolling micro-grants (\$1,000–\$10,000) to support small-scale activations such as arts programming, markets, performances, and pop-ups. These grants can be executed with minimal administration and operate as risk capital for smaller organizations.
- Matching grants to incentivize and support public space management and stewardship initiatives.
- Cooperative and one-time insurance coverage pre-authorized by city agencies, reducing a major financial and logistical barrier for organizers. These products could be co-vetted by city legal staff and private sector partners, so that public space partners can purchase these products, according to their tier (**Rec. Two**) and with assurance of their legal applicability.
- Accessible informational resources (websites, guides, brochures, workshops) that simplify and demystify the permitting process. These guides could be created in tandem with the other products here, such as the One-Stop Shop (**Rec. Five**) or the Space Stager Tool (**Rec. Six**). In a future instance, the Fund could “adopt” one of these programs and become the digital clearinghouse for city infrastructure under a license agreement. This would allow for these tools to be maintained and designed with much greater flexibility.
- Training and mentorship programs for public space management partners, with a focus on supporting new, emerging, and historically underrepresented groups. This blends financial aid with education, transforming grants into pathways for long-term community empowerment.

However, the Fund is only limited by creativity and resources. Future programs could expand any one of the above resources, or new ones could be created.

**3. Diversify revenue streams and partnerships**

For the Fund to be sustainable, it must rely on diverse revenue streams. Core funding could include a master contract with the City, supplemented by philanthropy, corporate sponsorships, and foundation grants. The Fund should also explore earned income opportunities, such as fee-for-service consulting, cross-sector partnerships, and collaborations with BIDs that may lack crucial cultural and public programming components. Partnerships with universities and arts councils

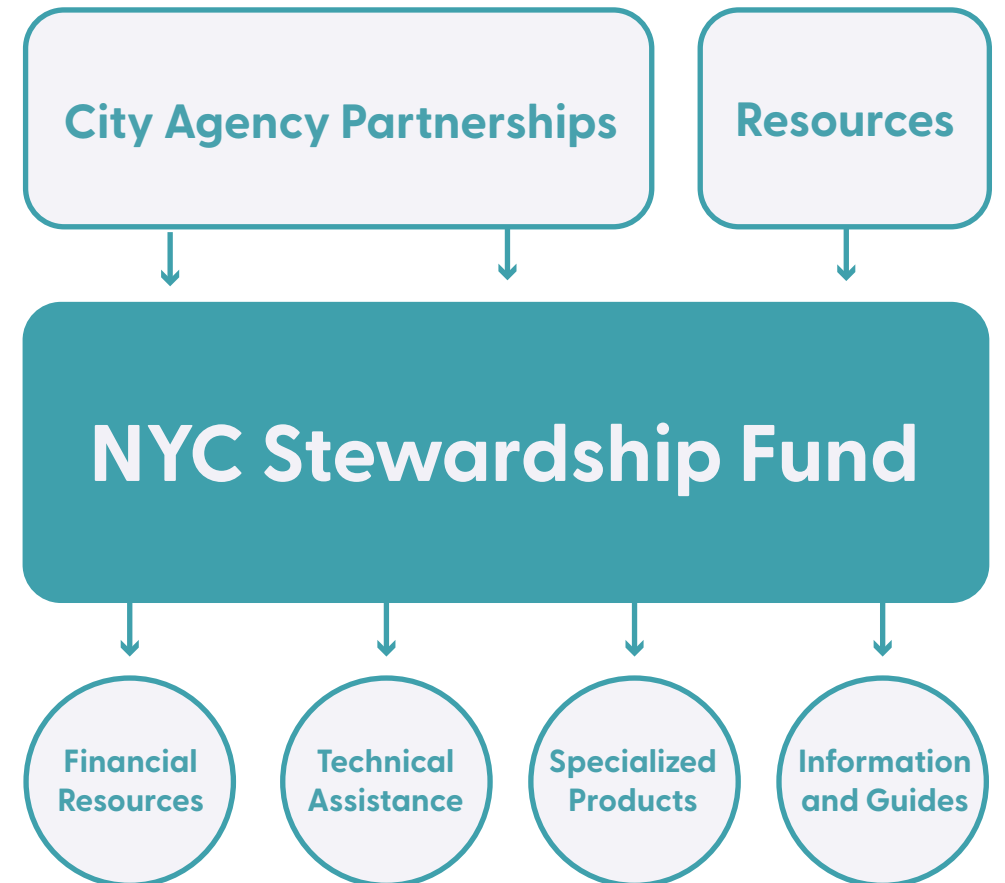


Fig 34. (Above) Potential diagram of Stewardship Fund organizational structure

could help document and disseminate the Fund’s impact, turning it into a learning model for public space governance.

Additionally, should the fee structure be improved, with clearer tiers, there is also an opportunity for the Fund to take advantage of increased permit fees for larger and more well-established public space producers, such as media companies, concert promoters, and cultural organizations. With more equitable but greater resources, the Fund could be super-charged as a conduit for marketing, community engagement, event promotion, event management, and other services that go beyond a typical nonprofit entity. The success of this direction would require innovative legal thinking about the for-profit potential of events, combined with a mission-driven service for local communities.

#### 4. Evaluate impact

Transparency will be central to the Fund's legitimacy. It should maintain a publicly accessible database and publish annual reports tracking the number, type, and geographic distribution of its support and awards. Evaluation metrics should include organizational growth, stewardship longevity, and community satisfaction. To ensure responsiveness, the Fund should maintain open feedback loops, hosting community listening sessions and peer-learning forums that allow grantees to share experiences and shape future programs. This culture of transparency and iteration will make the Fund more than a financial mechanism, it will be a civic institution of trust, ensuring that resources reach the people and places that need them most.

Fig 35. (Below) Collective Bloom by Acrylize



## Precedent

### New York City "Fund Of's"

New York City has long pioneered public private partnerships to extend the reach of needed services, starting with the Fund for the City of New York in 1961. Today, many such organizations demonstrate both the viability and flexibility of the "Fund of" model. The Public Housing Community Fund (2015) and City Parks Foundation's Partnerships for Parks (1995) show a variety of approaches that could be used to design the Public Space Stewardship Fund.

All three organizations share foundational characteristics: 501(c)(3) nonprofit status, formal partnerships with city agencies, diversified revenue streams combining public contracts with philanthropic support, and governance structures blending government oversight with community representation. This hybrid model enables them to operate with greater agility than traditional government programs while maintaining public accountability and mission alignment. Critically, each organization fills gaps that city agencies cannot address alone, whether due to procurement restrictions, budget cycles, or statutory limitations on direct service delivery.

Partnerships for Parks operates closest to the proposed model, providing grassroots park groups with small grants, technical assistance, and volunteer coordination, but only in NYC Parks controlled spaces. The Public Housing Community Fund shows how a partner can take on expansive capital projects and support programming that transforms NYCHA communities.

## Appendix One

# Methodology

## Appendix: Methodology

The Untaped initiative employed a four-phase approach supported by cross-sector partnerships and meaningful engagement with New Yorkers who regularly activate the public realm. Led by the Design Trust for Public Space, the process combined community insight with agency expertise to build a more accessible, collaborative, and equitable framework for public space activation in New York City. The approach balanced the experiences of organizers across all five boroughs, while also drawing on national learning from cities advancing innovative models for public realm stewardship.

The four-phased initiative consisted of Research, Partner-Based Analysis, Impact Evaluation, and Recommendations.

**Research Phase**

The project began with foundational research to understand the current landscape of public space activation and permitting in New York City. This phase included the formation of an advisory group, made up of fellows from the NYC Department of Transportation, NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, City Parks Foundation, Trust for Public Land, and community-based organizations representing all five boroughs. This group hosted a kickoff workshop to shape an initial research framework, and provided insight into how existing systems function on a daily basis. The fellows conducted background research; reviewed City policies, permitting processes, and public realm management structures; gathered initial qualitative data; and conducted limited field observations of active events. These early efforts clarified the key administrative and structural challenges facing public space permit applicants.

**Partner-Based Analysis**

The primary methodology of research focused on engaging with stakeholders and community-facing partners. Over the course of the project, the team engaged 55+ such stakeholders across all five boroughs, including cultural organizations; community development groups; arts non-profits; Open Streets partners; and food security, youth, and immigrant justice development organizations. Engagement methods included hands-on workshops, one-on-one interviews, focus groups, site visits, and transcript analysis, generating a rich body of qualitative data.

The project synthesized these insights with thematic coding of recurring issues, operational barriers, and structural inequalities. Community partners shared perspectives on navigating city systems, coordinat-

ing with agencies, operational burdens, and the lived experience of programming public spaces at the neighborhood scale. These findings shaped both the problem definition and the direction for the recommendations.

To ground this evaluation framework in a national context, the project team collaborated with the Trust for Public Land's Park Stewardship Community of Practice, which produced case studies on promising stewardship and permitting models from Philadelphia, Raleigh, San Francisco, Pittsburg, Austin, and Long Beach. These comparative insights offered valuable lessons on governance, risk management, insurance, capacity building, and community-based stewardship across U.S. cities.

#### Impact Evaluation

Rather than conducting a comprehensive impact survey across all organizations and events (an effort beyond the project scope), the team worked with Jon Stover and Associates (JS&A) to develop a pilot evaluation tool for public space activation and tested the tool in several real-world environments. This process helped inform the initiative's research and laid the groundwork for a more robust system: The NYC Public Space Programming Impact Tool.

This proposed tool would allow programming partners to select impact indicators that match their events and organizational goals, across four primary impact categories: community, placemaking, economic, and fiscal. These indicators would support consistent measurements, anonymous citywide aggregation, and an improved understanding of the value and outcomes of public space activation.

#### Recommendations

In the final phase, the project team synthesized research findings, stakeholder insights, national case studies, and policy analysis into a cohesive set of actionable recommendations. This refinement process took place through iterative workshops with stakeholders and advisory group members, ensuring that each recommendation reflected community needs, agency realities, and the broader goals of public realm equity. These final recommendations were reviewed with a broad group of stakeholders for final feedback and assessment.

**Fig 36.** (Right) Turnout NYC Queensboro Dance Festival; Source: Andre Whitehead



