

City of Philadelphia



Council of the City of Philadelphia Office of the Chief Clerk Room 402, City Hall Philadelphia

(Resolution No. 240715)

RESOLUTION

Authorizing the joint Committees on Public Safety and Streets and Services to hold hearings to investigate Philadelphia Police Department precinct policies and practices for approving and denying block party permits, and exploring methods to increase block party permit applications.

WHEREAS, Philadelphians from neighborhoods all over the City share a strong tradition of hosting neighborhood block parties, particularly during the summer months. These events help bring families of all backgrounds together and create a sense of community; and

WHEREAS, Block parties often compliment larger open streets events such as National Night Out, Philly Free Streets, the Odunde Festival, and the many parades, marathons and festivals that occur on larger corridors in the City. Block parties have historically served as a training ground for aspiring musicians and DJs, such as DJ Jazzy Jeff, and give car-strewn neighborhood streets a second look as public space gets repurposed for people; and

WHEREAS, The Philadelphia Streets Department offers residents a very lightweight process for permitting the closing of streets for block parties: a \$25 fee (\$60 if received within three weeks of the scheduled block party, \$150 if scheduled on a weekday) and signatures from 75 percent of your block (not including vacant properties). The Philadelphia Police Department historically gives the final signoff on a block party permit; and

WHEREAS, According to a City GIS dataset obtained by PlanPhilly, North and West Philadelphia zip codes predominated block party hosting in the City of Philadelphia between 2006 and 2016, with 68,553 permits being issued to nearly every block in the City at least once. While Northeast and Northwest Philadelphia were big exceptions, 3500 Ryan Avenue in Holmesburg hosted 69 block parties, the largest number of block parties over that period; and

WHEREAS, The dataset also showed that July 4th and Labor Day were far and away the major block party occasions, followed distantly by Memorial Day, Halloween, and weddings; and

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WHEREAS, Since 2016, block party application approvals in the City of Philadelphia have declined, and as of 2022 are down by at least half from 2019 after City officials halted the permitting of block parties during the COVID-19 pandemic; and

WHEREAS, According to reporting by Billy Penn, Streets Department and Police Department's changes and attempted changes to the block party permitting process in the 2010s have likely played a role in the decline of block party permits; and

WHEREAS, The Police Department denied 230 of 2,500 block party applications in 2022, citing little more than "criminal activity" and "safety concerns," which accounted for 86 percent of the block application rejections in 2021 and 77 percent of rejections in 2022; and

WHEREAS, The majority of these block party application denials were in majority Black and Brown neighborhoods in North and West Philadelphia, where block parties are most frequently hosted, according to city data; and

WHEREAS, Though the Police Department has denied applications where there have been high concentrations of shootings, rejections have also occurred on blocks that have not seen any criminal activity during a block party, and may not have seen any criminal activity on the block at all, but may be in close proximity to blocks that have. Permits have also been revoked after they're approved, due to "crime-related issues" or past failure to abide by City rules, and this has happened as late as the day before the scheduled block party; and

WHEREAS, The Police Department declines to provide more information on how "criminal activity" and "crime-related issues" are measured, and over what time period when deciding whether they should be grounds for denying a permit, instead leaving it up to the discretion of the police district's commanding officer tasked with analyzing the block party applications in a given district. How the police determine which areas are "problem blocks" and for how long, as well as why some permits are denied for safety reason while other block parties nearby are allowed, similarly has gone unanswered; and

WHEREAS, The lack of detail around party denials, as well as the lack of clear and consistent communication between the Philadelphia Police Department and block party organizers, becomes a source of frustration for communities that just want to enjoy a staple of Philadelphia life; and

WHEREAS, Just one denied permit can have a chilling effect. Application data reviewed by Billy Penn shows that a denial is rarely followed by another block party application the following year, let alone an approved party permit; and

WHEREAS, In 2018 *The Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that the Police Department had compiled a list of 922 blocks where block parties had been banned due to traffic or safety reasons, or for failing to shut down previously held block parties on time. Analysis of the City's banned blocks list showed nearly half of all blocks had a shooting between 2015 and 2018, with

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the Allegheny West, Kensington, and Logan/Ogontz/Fern Rock neighborhoods standing out for the number of blocks on the banned list; and

WHEREAS, That same year City officials instituted a new rule requiring the approval of a police precinct to get a block party permit, switching the order of the process from the Police Department giving final approval to the Police Department granting initial approval of a block party permit. After a public outcry and a petition campaign from Philadelphia 3.0, the City walked back the regulation; and

WHEREAS, The decline of block party applications and approvals has led to the decline of Philadelphia's cultural identity as the block party capital of the East Coast. To truly unlock the potential of our streets and our community's capacities to come together for recreation and enjoyment; now, therefore be it

RESOLVED, BY THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That the joint Committees on Public Safety and Streets and Services are hereby authorized to investigate Philadelphia Police Department precinct policies and practices for approving and denying block party permits, and exploring methods to increase block party permit applications

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CERTIFICATION: This is a true and correct copy of the original Resolution, Adopted by the Council of the City of Philadelphia on the fifth day of September, 2024.

Kenyatta Johnson
PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Elizabeth McCollum
INTERIM CHIEF CLERK OF THE COUNCIL

Introduced by: Councilmember Young

Sponsored by: Councilmembers Young, Gilmore Richardson, Jones, Landau,
Lozada, Brooks, O'Rourke, Driscoll and Squilla

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