

# CITY OF PHILADELPHIA PENNSYLVANIA

OFFICE OF THE CONTROLLER

**Office of the City Controller  
A City of Neighborhoods and Celebrations:  
Report on Special Event Management in  
Philadelphia**

**June 2026**



City Controller  
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*Ensuring transparency, accountability,  
and fiscal integrity in city government*





**Office of the City Controller**  
**A City of Neighborhoods and Celebrations: A**  
**Report on Special Event Management in Philadelphia**  
**June 2026**  
**Executive Summary**

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## Why the Controller’s Office Conducted the Review

Philadelphia hosts more than 1,400 permitted events annually, ranging from neighborhood street festivals, music festivals, athletic events, parades, and other special events. These events demonstrate Philadelphia’s unique identity and vibrant neighborhoods and strengthen the city’s tourism economy. The Controller’s Office conducted this review to examine the costs, administrative barriers, and processes that govern special event management in Philadelphia, with a focus on identifying opportunities to improve coordination and better align the city’s approach with best practices from peer cities. This review is intended to provide the city with a structural framework for event management that serves Philadelphia’s communities and its signature moments equally.

## What the Controller’s Office Found

Significant findings included:

- Rising Costs – Service costs are creating a financial burden for event organizers, with the Philadelphia Police Department (PPD) costs alone accounting for up to 44% of event budgets and increasing significantly due to staffing shortages, overtime, and an inconsistent system for determining necessary staffing levels.
- Permitting and Application Difficulties – With approval requirements involving up to 10 departments, the process can be slow, inconsistent, and create significant barriers to participation for small and mid-sized events.

## What the Controller’s Office Recommends

A review of peer cities with comparable event activity identified several practices Philadelphia could consider adopting. The Controller’s Office recommends:

- Implementing a tiered classification system similar to those used in other cities to align requirements and fees with event size, duration, and impact.
- Establishing a “One-Stop Shop” application process with upfront transparency that clearly outlines standardized requirements, shortens processing times, and encourages cross-departmental coordination.
- Investing in public safety staffing and providing support to PPD districts, Philadelphia Fire Department (PFD), and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) personnel to reduce overtime costs and improve service reliability.
- Strengthening coordination between Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and other departments to ensure equitable and consistent security planning.
- Improving cost transparency with equitable, standardized city service fees that allow organizers to plan financially throughout each stage of the event management process.

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# Overview of Philadelphia Event Landscape

Philadelphia hosts numerous public events, from neighborhood street festivals and small cultural celebrations to large-scale sporting competitions and music festivals. The constant flow of activities is what shapes the City's identity, strengthens local, neighborhood or corridor-based economies, and attracts visitors from all over the globe.

Every year, Philadelphia processes more than 1,400 permitted special events through the Office of Special Events (OSE).<sup>1</sup> These events range widely in size, attendance volume, and complexity. Some events, such as small block parties, require minimal licensing, while others, such as multi-day events, require extensive coordination across many city departments. Each event plays a distinct role in strengthening Philadelphia's cultural identity, neighborhood vibrancy, and local economy.

Philadelphia offers strong built-in advantages as a venue with dense, community focused neighborhoods, urban waterfronts and stadiums. However, the administrative burden of producing high-quality events has grown. Organizers must navigate a complex permitting process spanning multiple city departments while absorbing rising service costs and managing unpredictable requirements that vary from event to event.

The challenges event managers deal with have direct consequences. Many long-standing events have downsized, cancelled, or relocated outside the city. Organizers consistently point to the rising costs of PPD and security, due to staffing shortages, and inconsistencies within the permitting system, as huge deterrents for hosting in Philadelphia. In several cases, organizers have found more streamlined processes in neighboring counties, or across the bridge in New Jersey.

The Controller's Office reviewed Philadelphia's event management systems by assessing costs, operational barriers, and the ease of use of Philadelphia compared to peer cities of a similar scale. The review examined both events that continue to operate successfully in the city as well as those that have struggled or moved elsewhere, focusing on key categories of event hosting in Philadelphia, including street festivals, music festivals, athletic competitions, and other iconic and long-established events. We identified structural challenges from the perspective of event managers, as well as broader City-wide issues. The Controller's Office provided recommendations based on practices in other cities, to strengthen Philadelphia's event ecosystem.

## Street Festivals

Philadelphia's neighborhood-based street festivals are typically the more visible and community-focused events in the city. Often organized by BIDs, neighborhood associations, and nonprofit organizations, these festivals provide small businesses, local cultural organizations, and

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<sup>1</sup> *Office of Special Events | Homepage*. (2025, October 7). City of Philadelphia.

commercial corridors opportunities to showcase their hyper-local products and services. Unlike larger ticketed events, street festivals usually operate with much smaller resources and rely heavily on corporate, private, or public sponsorships, as well as vendor and volunteer support to achieve their goals.

In recent years, maintaining financial viability has imposed a substantial burden on organizers, with PPD costs representing the greatest concern. PPD costs can account for up to 44% of a street festival's budget, according to a Temple University study.<sup>2</sup> Since 2019, the cost of city services required to plan and operate an event has jumped from \$18,800 to nearly \$40,000, despite no significant growth in attendance or event footprint.<sup>3</sup>

For most event organizers, the costs are not only increasing, but they are also difficult to predict. With security requirements operating on a case-by-case basis, organizers must also work within the constraints of each PPD precinct's staffing levels and associated overtime costs. As a result, similar festivals or events held in other neighborhoods may face significantly different financial challenges. As staffing shortages have increased and reliance on overtime has grown, the hourly rates for security required to hold an event have made budgeting increasingly unpredictable.

The combined administrative and financial pressures have led to the cancellation or downsizing of long-standing community events that were once staples of Philadelphia neighborhoods.

### Northern Liberties Night Market Festival



[www.northernlibertiesnightmarket.com](http://www.northernlibertiesnightmarket.com)

The Northern Liberties Night Market Festival, organized by the Northern Liberties Arts and Commerce Alliance (Alliance), demonstrates the combined cost challenges facing community-led, small-scale events. Since launching in 2022, the Night Market has attracted roughly 1,000 attendees annually and featured many food and craft vendors. Vendor participation fees ranged

<sup>2</sup> Doshna, J. (n.d.). City Planning and Community Development. 2025 Graduate Planning Studio.

<sup>3</sup> Forman, B. (2025, September 5). Street festival organizers say the rising costs of Philadelphia police patrols are crushing them. Inquirer.Com.

from \$250 to \$2,500, were paid to the Alliance and used to cover city service costs, including PPD, sanitation, and license and inspections.

Despite no increase in attendance or vendors, the Office of Special Events issued a projected 2025 service estimate that was more than double the 2023 cost, totaling \$24,687. Understaffing of PPD contributed to higher hourly rates, leading to a recommendation that the festival contract out for certain services, further adding to the Alliance’s financial sustainability challenges.<sup>3</sup>

### Midtown Village Fall Festival



*Midtownvillage.org*

Similarly, the Midtown Village Fall Festival was once a major seasonal draw. In 2025, rising PPD and city-led operations costs led to the event’s cancellation. Although the festival once attracted tens of thousands of attendees and generated significant foot traffic for local businesses, organizers cited rising operational and security costs imposed by the city that made the event financially unviable. Although the festival was consistently well attended, organizers owed approximately \$22,000 to the city in unpaid city services that were provided during the event, highlighting the long-term financial obligations associated with hosting even the most successful events.<sup>4</sup>

### Manayunk Arts Festival



*Manayunk.com*

The Manayunk Arts Festival, one of the region’s largest outdoor arts festivals, further illustrates how increased service costs affect even well-established events. Each year, the festival attracts

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<sup>4</sup> Forman, B. (2025, September 24). Midtown Village cancels its fall festival after 20 years, citing rising costs. *Inquirer.Com*

over 40,000 Philadelphians and residents from surrounding counties, over the multi-day event. In 2019, approximately \$18,800 covered the costs of PPD, sanitation, and health and safety inspections; by 2023 with costs totaling nearly \$40,000, \$18,000 was barely enough to cover PPD costs alone.<sup>4</sup>

### Athletic Events

Philadelphia has long been known as an exciting and attractive host city for major athletic events, supported by historic venues, accessibility to all neighborhoods through public transit, and stadiums with experienced infrastructure. Outside the major professional sports teams, the city hosts dozens of regattas, races, and other large-scale competitions that draw regional and national audiences and participants while generating significant economic activity. In recent years, however, these events have been scaled back or relocated due to the same rising costs and coordination challenges affecting street festivals and cultural events.

### Regattas



*Dadvail.org*

Philadelphia's rowing tradition dates to 1873 and has grown over the past century into a nationally recognized location for competitive rowing. Major rowing events like the Jefferson Dad Vail Regatta, Stotesbury Cup Regatta, BAYADA Regatta, Philadelphia Frostbite Regatta, and the Philadelphia Youth Regatta have historically brought thousands of visitors to the city each season.

In recent years, however, several longstanding rowing events have relocated outside Philadelphia. After forty years of racing on the Schuylkill River, the BAYADA Regatta, the nation's first and longest-running regatta created exclusively for people with disabilities, moved to the Cooper River (NJ). The Philadelphia Frostbite Regatta also relocated to Mercer Lake (NJ) in 2014.

The Dad Vail Regatta is billed as the largest collegiate regatta in the country and is part of the annual regatta season which brings in more than \$20 million in local economic activity for small

businesses.<sup>5</sup> Given its large audience and established traditions, the relocation sparked significant discussion. In 2023, the Dad Vail Regatta relocated from Philadelphia to Pennsauken (NJ), after 70 years on the Schuylkill River. Organizers estimated that hosting the event on the Cooper River would cost approximately one third of what it would in Philadelphia.<sup>6</sup> The Cooper River venue also offered streamlined local support and a predictable pricing package for services, including emergency medical coverage, security, and sanitation bundled at a lower cost through a local authority.<sup>6</sup>

### Bike Races



[www.philadelphiacyclingclassic.com/](http://www.philadelphiacyclingclassic.com/)

The Cycling Classic, first held in 1985, was once a signature event that showcased the City’s atmosphere and scenic charm to hundreds of local and international competitors. But the race has not been hosted in the last 10 years, due to rising security costs, challenges coordinating multi-district street closures, crowd control, and cleanup operations along the 14-mile route.

The Cycling Classic is now scheduled to return following a decade-long hiatus, made possible by a privately led effort that secured new sponsorship, with the city providing public support and coordination.<sup>7</sup> The 2026 edition is projected to cost approximately \$2 million, including city services and prize purses, underscoring the scale of financial commitment required to bring events back to Philadelphia.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Levin, E. (n.d.). *Jefferson Dad Vail Regatta Returns to Cooper River Park for 85th Anniversary*.

<sup>6</sup> Kummer, F. (2023, July 11). *Why did dad vail choose the Cooper River again for 2024? The regatta’s top organizer explains*. Inquirer.com.

<sup>7</sup> Vadala, G.C. | N. (2025, September 16). *What to know about Philadelphia Cycling Classic’s return and history*. Inquirer.com.

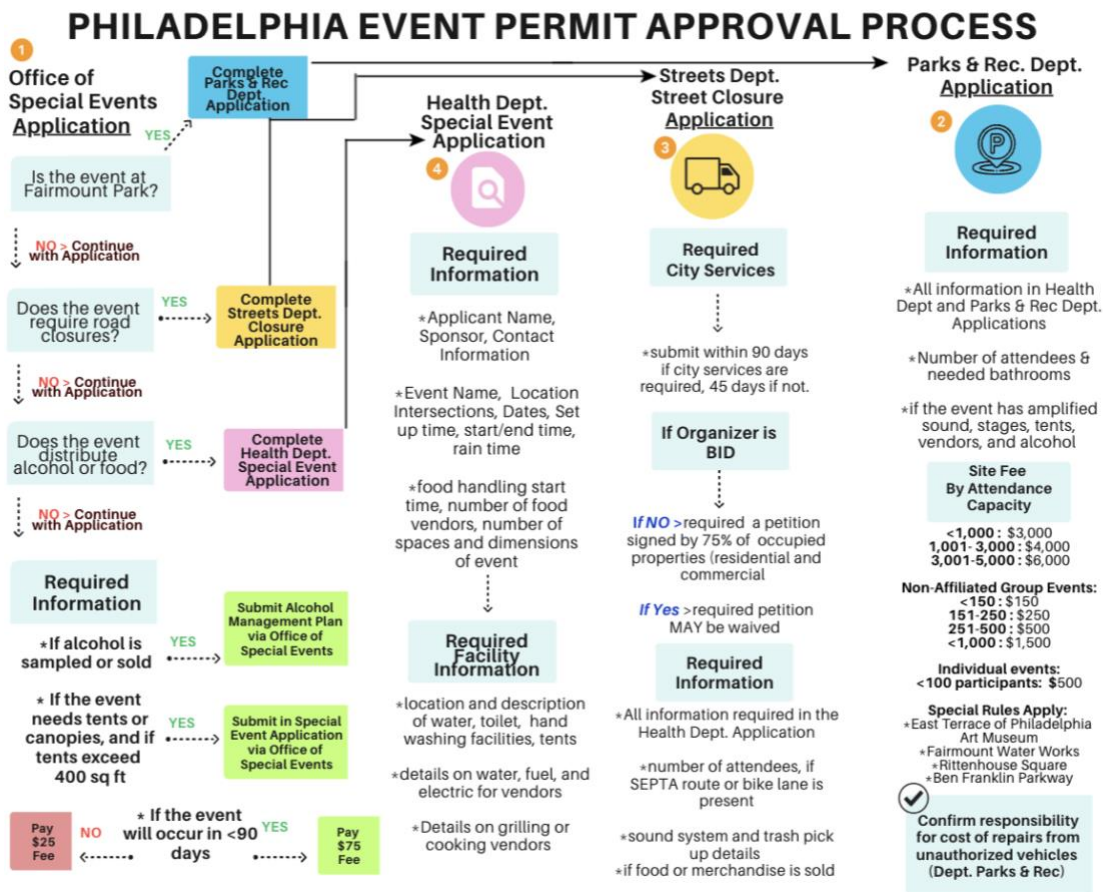
<sup>8</sup> AmeriGas® Brings Back Philadelphia’s Iconic Cycling Classic | UGI Corporation. (2025, September 16). UGI Corporation.

## Emerging Patterns

Across street festivals and athletic events, three structural issues explain most of the departure, shrinking, or cancellation of events reviewed in this report. These three issues, unpredictable and rising safety/security costs, a fragmented permitting process without consistent communication, and an unclear subsidization system, create an environment where the costs and complexity of hosting events in Philadelphia may outweigh the benefits. Trends in event management have reached a critical threshold.<sup>9</sup> In many cases, comparable events are being produced in a more cost-efficient way and with greater centralized support in neighboring counties that offer more streamlined, bundled service delivery. Without structural changes, the city risks losing long-standing, well-loved, and community-driven events.

## City Event Processes

### Permits, Applications, and Licenses



Information extracted from Cottone, A., Shaw, N., Misciagna, M., & Petracek, A. (2025). *Dancing In the Streets: A Comprehensive Planning Overview of Philadelphia BID Street Festivals*. Temple.edu; 2025 Graduate Planning Studio – Dr. Jeffrey P. Doshna, AIC

<sup>9</sup> “Philly street festivals are shutting down over rising police overtime costs. But some groups don’t have to pay,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, Nov. 13, 2025.

In Philadelphia, special event planning is coordinated by the OSE, which serves as the primary point of contact for event organizers and facilitates communication across city departments involved in permitting, security, and logistics.<sup>1</sup> While the OSE provides guidance and coordination, event planners are still responsible for securing specific permits, licenses, and approvals, which can vary on a case-by-case basis depending on the event type, location, and operational needs. The workload on OSE staff to keep track of and manage these events is substantial. Additionally, administrative requirements can create barriers for event planners and supporters, as permit requirements differ by department and may change based on how an event functions.

From the perspective of event organizers and vendors, these requirements create a significant burden. A survey found that 65% of respondents who take part in street festivals reported that their vendors chose not to take part in events due to application complexities or permitting expenses.<sup>2</sup> For example, events held in Parks and Recreation spaces, such as the Schuylkill River, require submission of the Parks and Recreation Special Event Application. Applications may be submitted up to one year in advance, with a \$25 fee if submitted at least 90 days before the event, and a \$75 fee if submitted less than 90 days in advance. Events taking place on city-owned property must also carry commercial liability insurance that protects both the event sponsor and the City of Philadelphia.<sup>10</sup>

If the event is stationary, organizers must provide a map showing the locations of food trucks and vendors, merchandise vendors, community resource tables, stage and sound equipment, barricades, and canopies or tents. Tent permits issued through the Department of Licenses and Inspections (L&I) are required for large tents or canopies. To prepare, sell, or distribute food at an event, organizers must adhere to all health codes set by the Office of Food Protection's Special Event Unit. Food vendors must contact the Office of Food Protection at least 30 days prior to the event. Event organizers must complete the Special Event Sponsor Application and provide a list of all attending vendors.<sup>12</sup>

Merchandise vendors must be individually approved by L&I, which regulates business and public safety permits, before making any sales. Event organizers must also obtain a Commercial Activities License. To sell alcohol, event organizers must submit a comprehensive Alcohol Management Plan with their completed special event application at least 30 days in advance. The management plan must include detailed information about alcohol service, security, staffing, and safety measures to ensure responsible consumption during the event.<sup>11</sup> Any "Beer Garden" must have adequate fencing and security, including a controlled perimeter with designated entrances and exits, a serving area, and a description of security procedures, all of which must be included

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<sup>10</sup> City of Philadelphia Office of Special Events. (n.d.). *Special Event Guidebook* (1st ed.).

<sup>11</sup> *City Of Philadelphia Office of Special Events Alcohol Management Plan Guidelines*. (N.D.). City Of Philadelphia Office of Special Events.

with the application.<sup>12</sup> Vendors may also require additional licenses depending on the type of business, including pushcart vendor, vendor motor vehicle, vendor-on-foot, sidewalk sales, and special vending district licenses.

This complexity disproportionately affects small and mid-sized events that rely on vendor participation or volunteer support, limiting accessibility and discouraging repeat participation.

### **Street Closure & Safety Requirements**

Events requiring street closures or traffic control must submit a Festival Street Closure Application, which is reviewed by the OSE, PPD, the Streets Department, and SEPTA. This review is intended to ensure public safety; however, the resulting staffing and security requirements often vary.

A Festival Street Closure Application requires a petition signed by 75% of the households on the block if the street is residential. If the event is held on a street without residents, event organizers must submit a copy of an insurance certificate to cover the cost of any damages that may result from the event. Events that provide portable restrooms must apply for a Portable Toilet Permit or Holding Tank Permit. This permit is required for events lasting more than four days or those providing more than 15 portable restroom units.<sup>11</sup>

The PPD has final decision making over security requirements, including protective measures, PPD officers, and traffic controllers necessary to staff an event. The cost of PPD services for events can range from 13% to 44% of an event's budget.<sup>2</sup> Organizers can determine PPD requirements by submitting a Special Event Permit application through the OSE. Once reviewed, the permit will include conditions set by the PPD. Hired sworn officers must be present at the event to enforce laws and are separate from hired private security. The cost of PPD services steadily increased as the PPD force has experienced 20% job vacancies, as shown below. The relationship between PPD understaffing and event costs is direct: fewer available officers means greater reliance on overtime, and overtime rates significantly drive up the security costs included in event budgets.

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<sup>12</sup> *Vendor Permit Rules*. Camden County Department of Parks. (2018).

**Philadelphia Police Department Staffing Numbers Over Time**

Year	Budgeted Staffing	Actual Staffing	Total Staffing
	Numbers	Number	Shortage
2019	7,537	7,402	135
2020	7,609	7,339	270
2021	7,456	7,019	437
2022	7,452	6,792	660
2023	7,480	6,475	1,005
2024	7,756	6,313	1,443
2025	7609	7339	270

For a special event, organizers must also develop an event safety plan that includes emergency contacts and communication, medical and first aid services, crowd management, weather contingency plans, evacuation and emergency response procedures, fire safety, incident reporting and communication.<sup>11</sup>

Organizers report that security requirements are often finalized late in the process, limiting their ability to adjust the scope of events or secure additional funding in time. As a result, street closures and public safety requirements represent some of the most significant sources of financial uncertainty in the event management system. Recent improvements in sworn officer staffing are encouraging, but the underlying issue extends beyond staffing shortages to the absence of standardized and transparent pricing structures for event services. Until such structures are present, cost unpredictability will persist regardless of staffing levels.

**Medical Requirements**

Emergency medical services (EMS) requirements vary based on event type, size, and risk profile. Small markets with limited attendance may not require on-site EMS coverage. In these cases, organizers must notify the city that EMS will not be present. For larger events, organizers may request EMS coverage from the PFD by submitting an EMS Special Event form. EMS provides on-site medical care and support to help ensure the safety and well-being of event participants and attendees.

Similar to PPD staffing, EMS availability has been affected by broader workforce pressures within PFD. The PFD also reserves the right to deny coverage if requests are not submitted in advance.

For certain events, such as regattas, EMS coverage is mandatory.<sup>11</sup> When coverage is denied or delayed, and organizers seek private medical services; the additional costs increase significantly.

### **Additional Requirements**

In addition to core permits and safety requirements, event organizers are required to comply with a range of additional administrative requirements. This includes American Disability Act (ADA) accessibility, vendor licenses approval, alcohol management plans, and applicable tax filings such as Business Income and Receipts Tax (BIRT). BIRT is levied by the City of Philadelphia on businesses that operate within the city. This applies to both the total revenue and profits of a business and must be filed annually by all for-profit entities doing business in Philadelphia. For event organizers with numerous temporary vendors, this adds a layer of financial and administrative complexity that many small operators are not equipped to navigate without professional assistance.

## **City Analysis: Philadelphia in a Regional Context**

Philadelphia operates in one of the most active and complex special event environments in the region, even the nation. The city hosts a higher volume of permitted events than many surrounding counties while relying on shared city services related specifically to safety, sanitation, and transportation. Where other cities have invested in tiered permitting, centralized platforms, and transparent cost structures, Philadelphia still relies on a fragmented department by department process that places most of the burden of coordination on event organizers themselves.

### **Camden, NJ**

In contrast, many other cities operate formal, tiered permit systems that provide clear standards based on size, risk, or service needs. For example, in the neighboring City of Camden, event permitting is more segmented, with clearer thresholds for staffing, more dynamic pricing models, and realistic review timelines. Applications are reviewed by the Special Events Review Committee, which includes the Department of Human Services, PPD, Public Works, PFD, Emergency Management, Code Enforcement, and the Parking Authority, with final approval from senior city officials.

Camden defines special events broadly to include parades, festivals, races, block parties, and any gathering that significantly impacts traffic, public safety, or municipal operations. To host events in public spaces or streets, applicants must apply for a Special Event Permit to the city's Special Events Review Panel. The non-refundable application fee is \$25, and the city reserves the right to cancel or alter the event as needed to ensure public wellness. For any Special Event, alcoholic beverages may not be sold. For permits requiring street closures, the streets must be re-opened by 8:00 PM, and 51% of households residing on the block of the event must approve of the event. The Department of Human Services manages the application process and coordinates

developmental review, while the Camden Police Department determines public safety and traffic control staffing and must approve all parades and street closures. The Department of Public Works reviews street use and sanitation needs and estimates cleanup and service costs, that are prepaid by organizers.<sup>13</sup> Fire safety oversight is provided by the Fire Prevention Bureau, which reviews temporary structures and food vendors.<sup>13</sup> Emergency Management reviews large or complex events to assess emergency access and preparedness. Final approval requires signatures from city officials, including the Mayor, Business Administrator, City Attorney, and Finance Director.<sup>13</sup>

### **Boston, MA**

Boston's outdoor event process balances community engagement, public safety, and efficient city management. Boston's "Rules and Regulations for Special Events" notes that applications are due at least 30 days before a large event and 20 days before a smaller event.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the city of Philadelphia encourages applicants to file 90 days in advance.<sup>15</sup> Boston also organizes its outdoor events into tiers, each with its own requirements and deadlines. Tier 1 events are smaller, typically stationary events with fewer than 140 attendees. Tier 2 includes larger, mobile events like races or walks. Tier 3 encompasses multi-day events with major infrastructure, such as alcohol sales or carnival activities. Liability insurance is required for Tier 2 and 3 events, with additional coverage for park use. High-profile events, such as the Boston Marathon and the Head of the Charles Regatta, require coordination across multiple city and state agencies, detailed safety and site plans, and compliance with environmental and operational standards.<sup>16</sup> Depending on the event's scale and impact, organizers must provide supplemental materials such as site maps, operation plans, and promotional materials. For example, events may require coordination with the Boston Fire Department for food vendors, the Transportation Department for road closures, and the Boston Entertainment, Tourism, and Special Events to oversee cultural and tourism-related aspects of event planning. The Parks and Recreation Department manages permitting for activities such as weddings or athletic games, with permits costing \$50 for residents and \$100 for non-residents.<sup>14</sup>

### **Chicago, IL**

Like Philadelphia, Chicago hosts major civic events but faces growing financial and logistical barriers, particularly related to policing, permitting, and infrastructure. All permits and applications sent through the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events are approved by other relevant departments, including the Police and the Fire Departments.<sup>17</sup> City laws require

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<sup>13</sup> City of Camden, NJ Code Special Events, § 716 (2025).

<sup>14</sup> *Rules and regulations for special events*. (2019, November 22). City of Boston.

<sup>15</sup> *Get a special event permit*. (n.d.). City of Philadelphia.

<sup>16</sup> Becker, K., & Kwangwari, M. (2026, April 18). Officials focused on Marathon Monday safety; FBI Boston says no known credible threats. NBC Boston.

<sup>17</sup> Mercado, M. (2024, August 12). City Street Festivals Are Underestimating Crowds by Tens of Thousands, Endangering Attendees. *Block Club Chicago*.

signage for festivals for free admission, causing declines in festival revenue.<sup>18</sup> Events held outside that involve street closures, food or alcohol sales, merchandise, or stages require special permits. Outdoor street festivals cost \$100 per block in downtown Chicago, and \$50 for other parts of the city.<sup>19</sup> Festivals that require tents or canopies larger than 240 square feet at public events require permits from the city.<sup>20</sup> Permits for large weekend festivals, such as Lollapalooza, can amount to \$2 million in permit fees.<sup>21</sup> Generally, organizers are required by the City to produce a certificate of insurance for \$1 million in commercial general liability. Street closures depend on the type of event and cannot exceed 14 days in length. They must be submitted at least 30 days before the event. If a festival's expected attendance exceeds 7,500, a "specialized staffing plan" requires approval by the Fire Department's Office of Special Events. Chicago code dictates that the number of EMS and police services depends on the estimated attendance, physical congestion of the festival, expected foot traffic, and vehicle congestion.<sup>19</sup> This is similar to Philadelphia, where EMS and Police services depend on the number of attendees and the number of blocks closed. However, in Philadelphia, due to police understaffing, the cost for police in Philadelphia is more varied. The Chicago Department of Transportation also requires a traffic control plan for all events that close an arterial street, boulevard, or signalized intersection.<sup>19</sup>

### New Orleans, LA

New Orleans hosts a larger number of annual public events that contribute significantly to tourism and local economic activity. In 2018, New Orleans had over 100 major national/international events, festivals, and outdoor markets,<sup>22</sup> which generated \$6B in tourist spending from 2.2 million attendees, and \$14.3 million in tax revenue.<sup>23</sup> To manage its larger volume of events, New Orleans has a "One Stop Shop" event application form to streamline approval and organization. The Master Event Sheet application consists of major forms that are required, and guidance to supplemental forms for liquor vendors or specific street closures.<sup>24</sup> In comparison, the Philadelphia event hosts are burdened with ensuring they complete the proper forms and applications, often leading to a muddled process that is inefficient and time-consuming. New Orleans applications must be completed 90 days before the event. New Orleans offers reduced application costs for nonprofits. The Alcoholic Beverages Permit Processing Fee is \$100 for non-profits and \$200 for other

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<sup>18</sup> Ramos, Elliot. (2024, November 15). *Most Chicago Street festivals aren't paying police overtime, leaving taxpayers on the hook*. CBS Chicago.

<sup>19</sup> The city of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events. (2025). *2025 Special Events Resource Guide*.

<sup>20</sup> Hard, R. (n.d.). *What Are the Guidelines for Planning a Public or Community Event?* LiveAbout.

<sup>21</sup> Ahern, M. A., & Bremer, S. (2022, August 22). *Newly-Obtained Contract Details Deal to Keep Lollapalooza in Chicago for 10 Years*. *NBC Chicago*

<sup>22</sup> *Special Events—City of New Orleans*. (n.d.). Nola.Gov.

<sup>23</sup> *City Of New Orleans Special Event Permit Guide & Applications*. (n.d.). Nola.Gov.

<sup>24</sup> *Services—Permits & Licenses—Events—Special Event Permit—City of New Orleans*. (n.d.). Nola.Gov.

organizers. Nonprofits experience no cost for a “Temporary Store Front in a Building,” but other organizers are charged \$500.25 per storefront.

Costs are the same for Music for Entertainment, where no admission is charged. Event organizers are required to obtain a Live Performance Permit for any event that uses PA systems, DJs, recorded music, and sound amplifiers. For events that are for-profit, a \$10,000 performance bond is required if 3 or more vendors participate. Event planners may also be subject to other forms, such as Street Closure/Block Party, Parade, and Park permits, depending on the event's location and scale.<sup>25</sup> Special Event permits are required for Itinerant (Roaming) Vendors, Stationary/Trade Show Vendor Promoters, Sporting Event Vendors, and for Alcoholic Beverages services. Party permits, parade permits, and permits for tents and Parks and Recreation Centers. Street closure applications can range from \$90 to over \$600, depending on the street. The High-Impact Special Event permit is required for events that are likely to attract international and domestic visitors and may require the use of multiple local and regional venues or sites. These events are likely to bring in 200,000 visitors and cost a minimum of \$200,000 in city costs. Event planners for High Impact Special Events are required to attend an Event Support Team meeting.<sup>26</sup> Taking inspiration from New Orleans “One Stop Shop” procedure for event applications would provide Philadelphians with a more streamlined process.

The structural differences have practical implications for event retention. In several cases, events that originated in Philadelphia have already chosen more streamlined processes and safety costs, like those offered in Camden. At the same time, Philadelphia is in the midst of preparing for citywide signature events with the current and upcoming 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This celebration is expected to bring an influx of visitors, increasing the strain on city services and competition for public safety staffing and logistical resources. The opportunity to implement structural changes before the peak of 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary is narrow. It is necessary to protect both the anniversary events and the community events that define Philadelphia the rest of, and the following years.

## Recommendations

The Controller’s Office recommends:

- Implementing a tiered classification system similar to those used in other cities to align requirements and fees with event size, duration, and impact.
- Establishing a “One-Stop Shop” application process with upfront transparency that clearly outlines standardized requirements, shortens processing times, and encourages cross-departmental coordination.

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<sup>25</sup> *New Special Event Fees*. (2017, March 15). Nola.gov.

<sup>26</sup> *Special Events—High-Impact Special Event*. (n.d.). Nola.gov.

- Investing in public safety staffing and providing support to PPD, PFD, and EMS personnel to reduce overtime costs and improve service reliability.
- Strengthening coordination between Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and other departments to ensure equitable and consistent security planning.
- Improving cost transparency with equitable, standardized city service fees that allow organizers to better plan financially throughout each stage of the event management process.

## Conclusion

Philadelphia's street festivals, athletic events, and community gatherings are central to the city's cultural identity and local economy. Rising PPD costs, fragmented permitting requirements across multiple departments, and unpredictable service requirements have led organizers to downsize, cancel, or relocate events that were once fixtures of Philadelphia neighborhoods. The relocation of long-standing regattas, the cancellation of the Midtown Village Fall Festival, and the decade-long absence of the Cycling Classic illustrate the operational and financial challenges associated with hosting events in Philadelphia.

Philadelphia continues to host major events that require coordination across city departments and public safety agencies. However, the current permitting process remains decentralized, with event organizers often responsible for coordinating requirements across multiple agencies. Smaller events may face difficulties related to staffing, permitting, and operational costs, while larger events require significant logistical coordination and public resources.

By modernizing its permitting and support processes, including standardized permitting systems, adopting a one-stop shop application system, and more transparent pricing structures for event-related services, the City can better plan resources, streamline approvals, and maintain safe, successful events. Doing so will ensure Philadelphia remains a premier destination for culturally and economically significant events long after 2026.

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