

# NEW YORK CITY: STREETS RENAISSANCE CAMPAIGN

## STREETS AS PLACES TO PLAY

### REVIVING AN OLD NEW YORK CITY TRADITION

Streets can be great places for children to play. New York has a long history of turning paved areas into opportunities for community gatherings, entertainment, and play. The last few years have seen improved access to streets for such activities. The movement has been driven by grassroots advocacy groups and community members who are effectively using new media tools to develop public awareness and build support. A recent increase in applications for block parties and high profile street closures are evidence of the success of this effort. In a densely developed urban area, street closures are a cost-efficient and effective way to provide children with access to safe, open areas for play.

### CONTEXT: GREEN SPACE AT A PREMIUM

New York City has very limited green space, with a few exceptions such as Central Park in Manhattan and Prospect Park in Brooklyn. The city's population continues to grow, increasing by over one million people in the past decade. The city planning department estimates that New York will grow by another 15% over the next 20 years.

There is very little space to develop new parks or play areas and the public spaces that are currently available are overcrowded. In 2000, 51 neighborhoods had less than 1.5 acres per 1,000 residents; 97 neighborhoods had more than 1,250 children per playground; and 34 neighborhoods had more than 2,500 children per playground.<sup>35</sup>

### THE INITIATIVE: URBAN SOLUTIONS FOR STREETS AS PLAY SPACES

The idea of claiming pavement as public space is not new. For decades, New York citizens have turned to their neighborhood streets for community gatherings, entertainment, and play—from the Police Athletic League's summer play streets beginning in the early 1900s to seasonal block parties in the 1960s and 1970s.

With few open spaces and innumerable apartment complexes, streets became places to play. Street play can be documented back to the early 1900s when the city officially cordoned off certain streets, along with parks, playgrounds, and settlements, for youth summer programs. These street closures were prevalent across the city. Over the past century, traffic and stricter regulations have limited street play.

But in the past five years New York has seen a resurgence of efforts to reclaim paved streets for uses other than cars and trucks. Much of this resurgence is organic and community-based. It has been driven by activists and nonprofit organizations who are tapping into the history of street play, the lack of undeveloped green space, and the increasing awareness of the value of space for communities and children to gather and play. Some groups are motivated by the opportunity for transportation alternatives, such as biking or walking. Some groups are explicitly advocating for more play space. In each case, initiatives to reclaim streets increase opportunities for children to be out playing.

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*The “Sunnyside of the Block Party” in Sunnyside, Queens.  
Photography courtesy of Emmanuel Fuentesbella.*

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### **Creating Momentum Through Collaboration**

Grassroots advocacy groups have emerged as one of the main public drivers for more family-friendly uses of the city’s streets. Working individually and collaboratively, they are developing momentum. Block parties are evidence of this momentum. More than 3,000 block parties were held in 2008. Although advocates report that navigating through the municipal permit process can be a challenge, they are working with city officials to establish a more streamlined and transparent process.

The movement in New York for streets as public spaces for play picked up significant momentum with the launch of the New York City Streets Renaissance campaign. Three organizations collaborated to launch and run this campaign: Project for Public Spaces, Transportation Alternatives, and The Open Planning Project. The goal for the campaign was to promote healthy, vibrant, and playful urban streets.

The three participating organizations each offer unique assets to the campaign. The Project for Public Spaces (PPS), with its planning and design expertise, provides the vision and messaging. Transportation Alternatives (TA) provides on-the-ground advocacy expertise and services, organizing volunteers, staging protests, and engaging communities. The Open Planning Project (TOPP) and its Livable Streets Initiative offer expertise in online social networks and various technology-based mechanisms, such as blogs and videos, to share information, resources, and ideas about promoting innovative uses of neighborhood streets, plazas, and sidewalks.

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## The campaign has four stated goals:

- Educate New York citizens about potential city policy proposals that could affect the quality of life of their neighborhood.
- Promote a rebalancing of public space away from private vehicles toward community need.
- Demonstrate to city officials the overwhelming public support of community friendly planning.
- Tap the potential of New Yorkers to re-imagine their own streets and re-claim them for their own use.

While the campaign's primary stated goal is to create a more livable and environmentally friendly city, campaign staff encourage event organizers to focus on child-friendly activities. "Kids are the most guaranteed constituents of closed streets—serving kids serves everybody," says Nathan John, who oversees TA's Block Party Program as part of the NYC Streets Renaissance Campaign.

## Block Parties

The city is experiencing a resurgence in block parties. These one-day events range from all-day music festivals to simple communal gatherings. As streets are blocked off, children have access to the space for play. With a \$15 permit, block parties are perhaps the most effective way to temporarily adopt public space in the city. There were more than 3,000 block parties held in 2008, up 300 from 2007.

Transportation Alternatives was a catalyst for these block parties. Beginning in 2008, TA awarded mini-grants to low-income groups interested in hosting block parties. Each \$300 grant covers the cost of the permit, along with food, drinks, and other supplies. TA provides on the ground support to ensure that events run smoothly. Of the 30 grants awarded last year, most were awarded to neighborhood groups and individuals holding a first-time block party.

In the summer of 2008, Emilia Crotty received a TA mini-grant to host a block party in Sunnyside, Queens. Crotty works for an organization that teaches children how to ride bikes; bike riding became a focus for this block party. In addition to bikes, the community provided jump ropes, sidewalk chalk, and hula hoops, and offered games like life-sized chess. "The chess was actually my favorite part," she says. "At one point there was a whole family playing and it was really great to see them doing something together." Crotty invited the city's Parks and Recreation Department. The park staff brought a "street games" mobile unit to the block party to paint faces and facilitate games. The Fire Department also contributed to the event by opening a fire hydrant for the children to play in the water.

Crotty invited organizations to pass out literature and speak at her event. One speaker was an urban planner. As a result of that informal session, the neighborhood is hoping to get improvements to the sidewalks and streets so that there will be increased neighborhood use. Crotty estimates that up to 200 people came to the Sunnyside block party throughout the day.

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## Play Streets: Jackson Heights

In 2008, a group of community leaders successfully advocated for a street closure in the Jackson Heights neighborhood. Neighbors were interested in closing off the street next to Travers Park, an area of concrete the size of a football field. The goal was to expand the area of the park to reduce crowding and to increase play space. Transportation Alternatives provided advocacy support to assist Jackson Heights residents in overcoming liability issues and working through the city bureaucracy to secure a permit. The community succeeded in closing down 78th Street every Sunday from June through November.

Jackson Heights is a diverse neighborhood. According to the 2000 census, 64% of its population is foreign born and 26% report speaking English either “not well” or “not at all.” Jackson Heights has one of the highest densities of children per acre of green space in New York (3,200 children per park or playground). The district places second-to-last in the amount of green space.

A few dedicated community groups, including the Jackson Heights Green Alliance, the Western Jackson Heights Alliance, and Jackson Beautification Group/Friends of Travers Park, have made Jackson Heights home to the most successful play street in New York since 1914.

Ron Hayduk, a member of the Jackson Heights Green Alliance, reached out to a friend of his in the city Department of Transportation to research street closure policies and process. He discovered that the original play street applications, dating back to 1910, were outdated and not on computer file. Hayduk also encountered some resistance on the part of city officials to issue permits for street closure. A key step in the process was securing the Community Board’s support.

While the borough’s Community Board initially identified liability and insurance issues as significant obstacles, Transportation Alternatives helped the community groups and the city development an agreement. The Department of Transportation would be liable for safety and maintenance while the neighbors would be responsible for opening and closing the street and maintaining a volunteer presence throughout the closure. This agreement required no actual change in public policy. Advocacy, public support, and historic precedence were key factors to moving the initiative forward.

The Jackson Heights play street provides space for children to play. According to neighbor Ed Westley, there are easily 1,000 people at the park on Sundays and all the children use the play street as an extension of the park. As parent Dudley Stewart says, before the play street there was “nowhere for my son to ride his bike without having to stop every 10 feet.”

The success of the play street has attracted the attention of public officials. New York State Assemblyman Jose Peralta attended the street closure and gave away back packs to promote the effort. Stewart, a Community Board Member, play street volunteer, and parent, says he was astounded by the response. “Once the play street started, people came from all walks of life, everyone wanted to help,” he said. “People donated money, equipment and just kept asking how they could help.”

Despite the strong community and political support for the Jackson Heights play street, the neighbors are struggling to expand the initiative beyond Sundays. The community

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applied to expand the play street to the entire weekend throughout the summer, but this request was denied. A subsequent application for a weekend street closure was also denied. The neighborhood associations are now working with local businesses to develop a more comprehensive plan for presentation to the Department of Transportation.

Transportation Alternatives identified the city permitting process as one of the most significant obstacles to scaling and sustaining play streets. They are advocating with the city for a more uniform and transparent permit process that will benefit Jackson Heights as well as other neighborhood groups that have expressed interest in play streets.

## **Engaging Youth in Advocacy: Prospect Park**

Transportation Alternatives established a youth summer advocacy internship program plan and implemented a youth-led advocacy campaign for a car-free Prospect Park. Prospect Park is one of the largest parks in New York City. There are two paved roads cutting through the park that were open to traffic and particularly dangerous during rush hour.

The youth used a variety of tactics to gather information and build support, including surveys of local residents to assess how neighbors were affected by the car traffic, blogs, and the collection of 10,000 signatures. The youth led a march of park users, along with their school marching band and two City Council members, across the Brooklyn Bridge to City Hall and presented Mayor Bloomberg with a mailbox of signed postcards advocating for the street closure.

In May 2009, the Department of Transportation agreed to close two more of the vehicular entrances to the park, significantly reducing traffic. One of the two closed entrances is located near a playground. Prior to the closure, parents were afraid to use the playground because of its proximity to traffic. The playground is now more accessible. Transportation Alternatives reports observed reductions in speeding near the playground.

## **Public Awareness: New Media**

New media tools are effective tactics for this livable streets advocacy effort. The Open Planning Project utilizes blogs, films, a streetwiki (a community-generated online encyclopedia), and a social networking platform to build public awareness and support.

## **SCALING UP AND SUSTAINABILITY**

The recent growth in the demand for block parties and the success of initial community-driven street closures points to a building movement in New York City to safeguard streets for play. This movement has its roots in early police department play streets, but its resurgence is driven by grassroots organizations and residents committed to more open space and areas for children to play. With more transparent, consistent, and streamlined permit processes, play streets and block parties are a cost effective and replicable way to increase access to play.

The challenge for communities and activists is building sufficient political support to affect clearer municipal systems and procedures for implementing these street closures and then ensuring that procedures and systems are transparent to the public. The permit process, as well as negotiation of details with the Department of Transportation and local Community Boards, are neither streamlined nor consistent across the city's boroughs.



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“We are currently in a position of bartering with the Department of Transportation,” says Nathan John, the manager of the NYC Streets Renaissance Campaign. “It’s as if our interests are detrimental to those of the city, when we are working to provide amenities to everyone in the neighborhood.” He says he and other streets advocates would like the city to create a “functional policy” that would enable expansion of the play streets program.

## OUTCOMES

Individuals and grassroots organizations were able to revive a century-old city policy of play streets. In the past two years, there has been growth in the number of streets closed to traffic and some particularly high visibility closures. Street closures, particularly in densely populated urban areas, create opportunities for children to be outdoors and to play.

**Quantity:** In 2008, residents held 3,000 block parties, an increase of 300 over 2007. The city also permitted one Sunday play street for seven months of the year serving roughly a thousand people a week. Efforts are under way to expand the program to additional neighborhoods.

**Quality:** Streets provide children with access to open space. How children make use of these spaces—the quality of play—varies street to street.

**Access:** Neighborhood play streets provide opportunities for safe play areas in close proximity to children’s homes.

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## CORE FINDINGS

**Develop strategic allies.** The Project for Public Spaces, the Open Planning Project, the Livable Streets Initiative, and Transportation Alternatives brought unique areas of expertise to a single campaign on a common area of interest.

**Engage direct beneficiaries.** Although Transportation Alternatives provides funding and guidance for block parties, residents are responsible for planning an event that suits their community's interests.

**Utilize new media to increase awareness and build support.** The Livable Streets Initiative uses a dynamic social networking platform to educate, organize, and connect city residents interested in creating open streets.

**Offer grants and experience to establish pilot programs.** In areas where the city has less uniform or accessible mechanisms for creating open streets, nonprofit organizations can establish pilot programs and provide support to launch first-time events.

**Create newsworthy events.** Transportation Alternatives created a strong event for the Prospect Park campaign by having youth advocates march across the Brooklyn Bridge to hand deliver their signed postcards of support to City Hall.

## CONCLUSIONS AND QUESTIONS

If one of the nation's most densely populated cities can close streets for play, then this model should be replicable in other places across the country. How can advocates accelerate support for street closures in their own cities? How can major urban centers accelerate this internal process? And, extrapolating from the New York example, what other cities have long-held traditions that can be revived or modified to create additional open space?

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