

## Scaling Up Community Engagement Through Community Events

While community events help individuals from various places form relationships and build unity, they also support neighborhoods as a whole and help organizations and local governments achieve deeper development goals. Good strategies empower, support, and educate both residents and stakeholders and while the main objective may be to bring people closer together, another related and longer-term goal is to help neighborhoods move forward with quality-of-life goals. The economic advantages of hosting an event can also be significant, when building connections between individuals and businesses is intentional. Event results can be used in goal setting, neighborhood planning and many aspects of reporting by practitioners, business owners, neighborhood residents and local government.

This case study highlights two approaches to events that support community development: one targeting December holidays and connecting with the business community (Detroit, MI); and the other focusing on celebrations held throughout the year as a way to build cooperation and promote neighborhood pride (Baton Rouge, LA).

### Holiday Activation in Detroit (Invest Detroit, MI)

Detroit is home to an annual holiday activation campaign that brings together a network of small business support organizations that connect small businesses with potential consumers throughout the holiday shopping season. The intent is to create a strong support network for entrepreneurs and make sure that, as the city grows and develops, its business development is inclusive and helps produce vibrant, self-sufficient neighborhoods. In



Detroit, 'holiday activation' takes place after Thanksgiving and is a true story of collaboration between a vast group of small businesses, nonprofits, economic development agencies, and business support organizations in different neighborhoods working to create safe

places and lively economies. Key partners include neighborhood community development organizations and the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation.



The point of Detroit's holiday activation is to celebrate small businesses and drive traffic to them, while also celebrating what brings people together as a community. Partners work to bring attention to the unique goods and services offered by neighborhood entrepreneurs. It supports the idea that each individual person is part of the neighborhood's greater economic ecosystem.

**Holiday Activation Mini Grants** – The Detroit Economic Growth Corporation has administered around \$30,000 the past two holiday seasons to fuel Detroit’s holiday activations which may include pop-up shops or other events in various neighborhoods of the city. Funds may be used for promotional or marketing activities, supplies, or prizes for consumers. In the first year of the mini grant program, 2021, \$30,000 was provided to 20 grantees (chosen from 143 applications). Examples of funded projects included vendor markets, storefront decorating contests (cash prizes), tree lighting events, promotional activities, marketing support, storefront pop-ups, live music for corridor marketplaces, bus tours with lunch and refreshments, food tickets and door prizes, and so on. Awards were between \$1,000 and \$2,000.

In 2022, the Holiday Activation Mini Grants served two cohorts: one for for-profit and nonprofit entities and the second for individuals and neighborhood groups. Winners were decided by a selection committee, and applications were scored using specific criteria that valued projects bringing energy, opportunity and collaboration to neighborhoods and commercial corridors. A clear and transparent set of scoring criteria was developed so applicants understood funder objectives and the selection committee could be fair in its analysis and selection.

### **Best Practices and Great Ideas**

The holiday activation strategy has been building over the past four to five years, and the partners involved have identified a few key ideas for success:

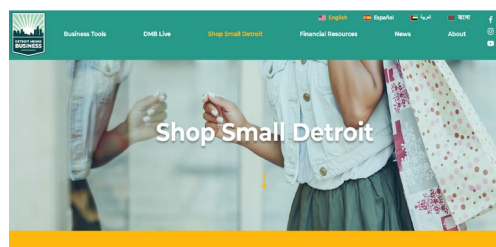
**Create a Consumer Guide** - Create a map of all local businesses and provide a short outline of goods and services for each entity listed, color coded by category. Send the guide to local consumers plus larger corporations like medical and educational institutions. Encourage larger entities to support smaller businesses by purchasing gifts for employees or using their goods or services for holiday parties.

**Try Community Bingo or a Scavenger Hunt** – Create fun and interactive activities that send consumers searching for specific goods and services in the district. Create a stamp or sticker that businesses can add to the card once the consumer finds the item, and once the card is full (BINGO!) the consumer wins a gift card to one of the participating businesses. This is a great opportunity for an interactive social media strategy: post photo clues or riddles to make it fun and keep the community engaged.

**Offer Marketing Support** – Provide a marketing platform with various tools that small businesses can adopt and strategies they can easily adapt to their existing designs so they can better advertise their goods, services, and special promotions. Check out Detroit’s ‘Shop Small’ web page at

<https://www.detroitmeansbusiness.org/shopsmaldetroit>

**The Business Support Network Office at Invest Detroit** was formed in 2021 in partnership with the New Economy Initiative (NEI) to serve as a convener of businesses and the organizations that support them in Wayne County. They identify needs or support missing program roles from the existing set of community small business support programs, mobilize the network for quick action, and engage with business owners to ensure the network of support is known and relevant to their needs. NEI has been cultivating a network of Business Support Organizations (BSOs) for over 12 years in Southeast Michigan.



**Offer ‘Best Practices’ Webinars** – Host webinars for local businesses and neighborhood groups that explain how to make the most of the holiday season. Collaborate with others to share strategies and get the community excited for upcoming events and activities. The holidays can be a fun time and social options can be a great opportunity. Provide ideas for those who are not social media savvy or lack a strong web presence and provide training on community organizing and event planning.

**Solidify the Network** – Help local businesses to connect with consumers as well as each other. Building camaraderie between businesses and the community creates economic vibrancy and a vitality that positively impacts the entire area. Build opportunities for nonprofits and civic organizations to connect and be creative. For example, a bus, bike, or walking tour that weaves individual events together can build alliances. Each effort will likely spark new ideas for partnerships and opportunity.

**Support Underserved Micro Businesses** – Even if there is no specific definition of ‘underserved’ in your community, a focus on minority business enterprises, middle neighborhoods, areas of disinvestment, and micro businesses such as solo-preneurs and family-owned ‘mom and pop’ shops, will help advance overall efforts in community development. Get creative about how non-retail businesses such as daycare centers, independent grocers, restaurants, salons, gyms, etc. might participate, too.

#### **Questions?**

Lily Hamburger, Associate Director  
Business Support Network, Invest Detroit, Detroit MI

### **Beyond December: Celebrating Year-Round in Baton Rouge (Mid City Redevelopment Alliance (MCRA), LA)**

Successful community engagement can also be furthered by hosting celebrations beyond the traditional December holidays. MCRA facilitates various activities throughout the year and each effort helps the organization to stay connected with residents and keep neighborhood improvement plans moving forward.

Community events can be tied to any national holiday (MLK Day of Service, Valentine’s Day, St. Patrick’s Day, Easter Egg Hunt, Cinco de Mayo, Juneteenth, etc.) or can be built upon something completely unique to the neighborhood. They can be paired with fun activities that help advance neighborhood goals and can also focus on addressing a need, like blight remediation, or a community investment initiative, like economic development. Businesses and agencies in the community are a great addition to community events: invite them to set up information tables with snacks and swag.

**Mid City Redevelopment Alliance, Baton Rouge, LA** has worked for over 30 years to develop and promote growth and revitalization in the Mid-City area of Baton Rouge. The organization supports comprehensive community revitalization by prioritizing people and place.



Events that align with something special in the neighborhood are a great way to build pride in place. This could mean celebrating a historic landmark or piggybacking onto a larger event from the surrounding area. For example, in Baton Rouge, MCRA builds on the Mardi Gras theme by hosting “MidCity Gras” the Sunday before Mardi Gras. This popular event features the main corridor and brings residents together to enjoy and celebrate the neighborhood.

**EVENT EXAMPLE: COMMUNITY BIKE RIDE.** One local resident group wanted to do something to address crime in their neighborhood and therefore set up a community bike ride as a strategy to meet neighbors, be visible, get healthy, and learn about hidden gems in the area. Residents submitted ideas to be included on the tour and as participants stopped in that space, neighbors shared the stories behind it. This was a great way to make new connections and reunite old friends. It created a positive activity and cost nothing to offer. It helped residents to see the beauty in their space and built neighborhood pride.



Other low- or no-cost activity examples include:

- Community bonfires
- Block parties
- Indoor or outdoor movie nights
- Music events and community picnics
- Pop-up pocket parks for game day or story hour with the library
- Neighborhood clean ups or yard raking
- Corridor cleanups, graffiti cleanup, bus-stop beautification
- Community art shows
- Chalk art
- Community walks or bike tours

Another way to build solidarity and provide new opportunities for residents to work together is to help residents develop (or redevelop) a neighborhood identity. Branding efforts may include creating a neighborhood motto or designing community colors, a logo, or mascot. Any of those ideas can then be built into community events, business relations, school events, and local government initiatives.

**BRANDING EXAMPLE: A COMMUNITY TREE.** To help build a community identity for the neighborhood, MCRA created a large tree with construction paper leaves and asked people to answer the following question: “What do you think of when you think of our community?”

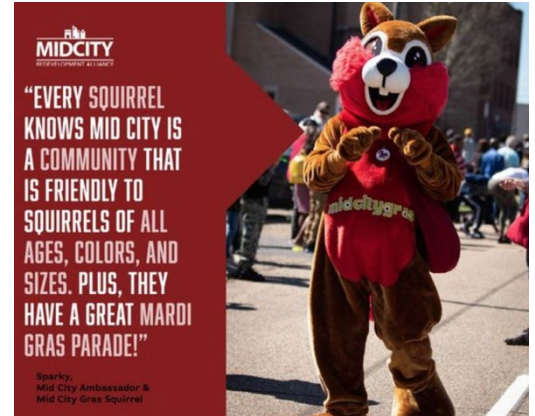
Residents wrote answers on paper leaves and taped them to the tree, which was then moved to different locations around the community. After six months of collecting leaves at six different





community events, MCRA evaluated trends and identified themes. This was a great way to gather community input and provided fun social media interactions as well.

MCRA would post where the tree was and invite people to visit and share ideas. Those ideas were then used to select the neighborhood logo, an acorn. MCRA hired a design company to develop the logo, then shared it with the public. Anyone can use it, as long as they don't make changes to it, and groups now add the logo to their materials, promotions, and social media channels. The logo also became the basis for a community mascot - Sparky the Squirrel - who visits community events, sporting events, parades, schools, libraries, and so on. MCRA held a naming contest for Sparky, which was fun for residents, and the entire process helped community members feel a part of building the overall neighborhood character.



**Strategies for Success.** Many factors can impact success but here are a few general starting points:

**Identify Need** – Look through the lens of residents to identify common goals and desired outcomes. Community events can help address neighborhood needs and can help shape a neighborhood's image for both residents and surrounding populations.

**Find a Purpose** – Before implementing a new event or activity, think first about its purpose. Identify goals and objectives and invite supportive resources and local leadership to the table. Events and activities should complement the overall neighborhood agenda and can include larger goals like accessibility, safety, and affordability.

**Build a Plan** – Once the need and purpose are determined, outline steps to success. Identify who the audience is -- including participants, leadership, beneficiaries, and area stakeholders-- and make sure design aligns with the intended audience. Identify partners and resources that fit with goals and activate robust strategies for volunteer recruitment. Develop a social media and advertising campaign and engage with neighborhood influencers including local businesses, schools, and nonprofit organizations. Create email and social media communications that can be shared widely.

**Nurture Sustainability** – Start small so outcomes feel doable, and delegate tasks so organizers are not overwhelmed with responsibility. Recruit adequate leadership and funding options and create a contact list of helpers along with a to-do list, resource list, and steps to completion. Form a simple oversight committee and provide them with templates for communication.

## Questions?

Symphony Malveaux, MPA Community Engagement Manager  
MidCity Redevelopment Alliance, Baton Rouge LA

## Basic Best Practices for Community Events

Start Planning Early	Meet in January and plan for the upcoming year. Collect feedback from business owners and neighborhood groups on what has worked best and has created the most impact. Include impact on revenue and participation to prove success if possible. It takes time to plan and get the support needed.
Coordinate Schedules	Create a schedule of events across neighborhoods so schedules do not conflict with other neighborhood activities. Note dates as well as times of day so attention can be dispersed. Also, start promotional work early, at least two months ahead of the event, not only to build anticipation but to allow for collaboration.
Build in Pop-Ups	Create a list of pop-up opportunities and share with local vendors, business owners and sole proprietors. These collaborations are a win-win for small and micro-businesses as well as the residents and event coordinators. Provide a list of events as well as micro businesses to help planners connect with entrepreneurs. Pop up events are a great way to test an idea without much investment or risk.
Keep Meticulous Notes	Take notes on what works and what doesn't. Create a task list and resource list and make updates and changes as necessary each year.
Get Sponsorships	Events often focus on small businesses or micro-enterprises but that does not mean bigger funders do not want to be involved. Find ways for the larger funding community to get involved and support the overall effort.
<b>Some Other Good Ideas</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start Small</li> <li>• Have a vendor fair</li> <li>• Invite a musician with a guitar</li> <li>• Invite Santa if it's holiday time</li> <li>• Have a decorating contest</li> <li>• Ask police officers to join and grill hotdogs</li> <li>• Ask grocery stores to donate water</li> <li>• Purchase or sponsor a community coffee cart that groups can borrow for events</li> <li>• Be consistent with offerings and messaging each year</li> <li>• Add a fundraising component when possible and appropriate</li> <li>• Use a downtown or central corridor as part of the kickoff</li> <li>• Create a list of business and resources and add it to local organization's websites</li> <li>• Offer specific strategies for businesses who are less social media- or web-savvy</li> </ul>	

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