

BLOCK PARTY PLANNING GUIDE

BY BOSTON CITY COUNCILOR MICHELLE WU

SUMMER 2019



BUILDING DEMOCRACY, BLOCK BY BLOCK

On the fourth Thursday in August, my neighbors and I cordon off the ends of our block and take over the street for an evening. The annual Augustus Ave block party is an exercise in teamwork and deep democracy.

Joe gets the word out a few weeks in advance by dropping flyers at every door down the street. Frances, Mark, Nina, and Ron bring out tables and chairs. Beth makes her pasta salad and gets bubble wands and sidewalk chalk ready for the kids. Robin hosts the inflatable bouncy house in her front yard. Dorothy and Dennis lead the clean up crew. Glenn is in charge of music. And the wider neighborhood joins us for burgers and arepas, conversation and community.

There's magic in seeing slightly familiar faces become new neighborhood friends over ice cream and cold drinks. Social scientists would describe this as building social cohesion, or strengthening the human ties that are important for personal and public health.

We're happier when we know our neighbors, and safer too. During natural disasters or emergencies, the most resilient communities--places that suffer the fewest casualties and rebuild more quickly--are not the wealthiest neighborhoods or ones that have spent the most on physical infrastructure, but rather the communities with the strongest social infrastructure.

When people know and care about their neighbors, they show up for each other in tough times and work together more effectively to boost quality of life in all the times in between. These community ties are also an important foundation for civic engagement and action at a moment when much is at stake.

As individuals we can feel powerless at the scale of the political crisis unfolding daily, with government refusing to confront any of the disasters looming before us: climate crisis, opioid crisis, housing crisis, constitutional crisis, structural racism, deepening income inequality, crushing congestion.

But our divided politics isn't the problem. It's a symptom of the underlying societal ailment that each one of us has a role in treating: a crisis of trust.

Americans are increasingly alone. We have fewer confidantes and social connections. Our communications habits reinforce silos and isolation. More time scrolling through endless emails, emojis and memes leaves less time face-to-face with family and community.

The breakdown is happening street by street. Forty years ago, one out of three Americans spent time with their neighbors at least twice a week. Today four out of five people don't see their neighbors regularly, and one-third don't interact with any neighbors at all. When we don't know the names of the people living in the same building or down the street, we mark the loss of an important support network.

Eroding relationships and trust at a personal level add up to policy paralysis at a societal level. We need bold changes to match the urgency of our challenges, but can't marshal the political will to choose a course of action without shared consensus. It's natural to oppose potential changes if you don't trust that your community will actually benefit, or if you don't see yourself as part of the larger community.

Want to fix our broken democracy? Organize a block party. Create the rare forum to connect not based on similar political affiliations or policy views, but simply because of a shared stake in the same place. Celebrate your neighbors and find ways to keep those ties strong year-round.

Since last summer's block party, my neighbor Frances has taken on setting up a neighborhood association with regular meetings to bring us together through the fall, winter, and spring. We have a forum to share concerns, weigh in on local issues, and keep strengthening our social infrastructure. And we're planning an even bigger block party for this August.

Full civic engagement requires more than individuals committing to vote. Charting a brighter shared future requires each of us to cherish our stake in the wider community and know the joy of being part of a strong civic fabric.

This summer, get to know your neighbors and plan a block party together. Our democracy depends on it.

Michelle Wu

BLOCK PARTY PLANNING: A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE FOR BOSTON RESIDENTS

Plan with a Team

Talk to your neighbors and recruit a few other interested residents to help plan your block party. Consider hosting a neighborhood meeting to discuss details and divide up responsibilities:

- Pick a date.
- Decide on the scale and size of event based on shared goals and timeframe.
- Have a sign-in sheet and get everyone's contact information to coordinate planning for the event AND stay in touch afterwards about neighborhood news and other events.
- Choose who will be in charge of which tasks.

Apply for Any Necessary Permits

If you keep grills, music, and bounce houses on private property rather than on public streets or sidewalks, you may not need any extra permits. The full guide to Entertainment Licensing regulations can be found here: <https://bit.ly/2F7zrF1>

- To close your street for a small party... Apply for a permit at least 3 weeks in advance here: <https://bit.ly/2XPPaQd>
- To host a larger scale event... You will need to give as much notice as possible and should start by contacting the Mayor's Office of Special Events: <https://bit.ly/2uNNjw2>

The following items require permits. Contact the Office of Consumer Affairs and Licensing at 617-635-4165 or in City Hall Room 817

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|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| • Food for sale | • Tents |
| • Alcoholic drinks vendor | • Stages or other structures |
| • Live and/or amplified music | • Propane |

More information on permits for the items listed above, along with other common public event permits can be found here: <https://bit.ly/2XTSqK>

Borrow, Rent, and Buy Materials

Create a shopping list (see a sample list below). Ask neighbors and friends if they have items they can lend or contribute.



Spread the Word

- Design a flyer that can be emailed, posted on social media, and dropped off at doorsteps.
- Share the flyer with everyone on the planning committee to post and distribute to their networks.
- Consider sharing on social media and posting to neighborhood Facebook groups.
- Consider posting the flyer on a community bulletin board at the library or other community space.
- See a sample flyer below, designed with the free graphic design tool Canva.com.

SAMPLE BLOCK PARTY POSTER:



SAMPLE SHOPPING LIST & BUDGET TRACKER:

Item	Quantity	Cost	Source	Who picks up?	Done?
Bounce house					
Grill					
Hot dogs & Buns					
Other food dishes					
Condiments					
Popsicles					
Chips & Side Dishes					
Desserts					
Tables/Chairs					
Coolers					
Ice					
Drinks					
Pop up tents					
Trash Cans & Bags					
Music/Speakers/DJ					
Extension cords					
Plates					
Napkins					
Plasticware					
Foil pans					
Porta Potty					
Games/Kid Activities					
Decorations					





Keep It Going!

- Consider reaching out to all who came to thank them for coming, and acknowledge volunteers and groups who donated to the party.
- Pick a time shortly afterward to meet up with everyone who helped to talk about what worked and what you may want to change.
- Share any pictures with the group and save them to spread the word for next year.
- Please let me know how it went by reaching out via my contact info below!

#BYOBP: BUILD YOUR OWN BLOCK PARTY!

Create More Connections

Consider having someone from the local neighborhood association run a sign-in table for attendees so everyone can keep in touch for future events. Create a makeshift community board with information about local groups and activities or save a table for groups to share materials.

Day Of Reminders

- Plan to start setting up at least 1-2 hours before the event.
- Be prepared for neighbors to arrive early, and leave yourself time to run to the store for last minute needs.
- Get drinks into the ice coolers early so that they are ready when the party starts.
- Set aside extra trash bags and other backup items to be easily accessible.
- Help people know they are in the correct spot by hanging flyers or decorating with sidewalk chalk.

STAY IN TOUCH!
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