

Over the past five years, more than 50 open streets initiatives have taken root across North America. Cities of all sizes have reaped the economic, health and community building benefits of open streets, and many are now looking to expand both the frequency and length of their events and initiatives. But how do you go from an event that happens once a year to something that is ingrained in the culture of the city? On February 29, 2012, the Alliance hosted a call addressing how cities can overcome obstacles and grow their initiative with panelists Bobby Gadda (CicLAvia / Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition), Ben Weiss (Missoula in Motion) and Susan King (Livable City, San Francisco).

Tips from Bobby Gadda:



The first step to open streets: City support

- Getting CicLAvia — Los Angeles' successful open streets initiative — off the ground was a long process. And it never would have happened without the backing of both city residents and political officials.
- To spread the idea and gain public support, “we started at a more grassroots level, going to neighborhood councils,” Bobby said. “We went neighborhood to neighborhood all along the (ciclovia) route and then we took that to city hall.”
- Working their connections and relationships, organizers got the blessing of city officials and, most importantly, the mayor. “Getting city support, getting the mayor involved, is what made our event possible,” Bobby said.

Go to the pros for event organizing and promotion

- Once the initiative had the green light, CicLAvia organizers involved a professional event production company. With 20 years of experience pulling permits for festivals and doing all the related legwork, getting experts involved made the planning far easier.
- “Reach out to professionals like that in your city to, at least, get their advice,” Bobby advised. “In our case, the president [of the company] became one of the most important people to putting on CicLAvia.”

Engage the community in efforts to expand

- The first CicLAvia in October 2010 exceeded the expectations of all involved. The second event, along the same route, drew an equally impressive crowd. To build on that success and benefit a broader segment of the LA-region population, the organizers sought to expand into new routes.
- To gain community input and buy-in, the organizers formed host committees in a number of targeted — and interested — neighborhoods. One particular committee in South LA took off, not only working on the event itself but also hosting monthly social rides.
- “The last event in October, when we expanded to South LA using the routes developed by that group, was a really successful model in expanding the route and making it longer,” Bobby said.

Growing your Open Streets Initiative

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Don't disappear between events

- Even the most successful North American initiatives occur intermittently or seasonally, so it's important to maintain the momentum. "We've only been doing CicLAvia twice per year, so it's important to engage people between events, to keep them involved and updated," Bobby said.
- "We host CicLAvia rides where we ride a part of the route or explore new routes, so we can engage people and say, 'CicLAvia is still around. We're looking forward to the next one but come and hang out with us and meet us in the meantime.'"

Think beyond your city borders

- With 88 cities in Los Angeles County, CicLAvia has huge potential to expand to new areas and engage new populations. "We've had some support from county health departments who want to see CicLAvia in these high-need cities and neighborhoods that are affected by obesity and poverty," Bobby said. "So we're having outreach meetings with city departments saying, 'This is what CicLAvia is. We want to bring it to your city. What can you bring to the table?'"
- Already, CicLAvia has secured a partnership with Long Beach officials to bring open streets to their city in September.

Tips from Ben Weiss:



Think strategically and synchronize your efforts

- Missoula in Motion, the county Transportation Demand Management organization, worked with a variety of partners, including the city Parks and Recreation Department, to make Sunday Streets a reality. "We teamed up with the downtown business association to get the first event up and running," Ben said. "Even though we do like bikes here — a lot of people ride to work or for recreation — we're in the middle of fairly red state where people are skeptical of closing streets down. So we needed to ensure that first event went well."
- To do that, they chose their dates and destination wisely. "We coordinated well with other events that were happening: a German festival, a block party for a young and hip business district and also a short road race sponsored by local nonprofit running group," Ben said. "By synchronizing with other events we were building on the fact that some people were coming downtown anyway. We also chose a route that was very visible and very central and not too much of a stretch for people to think about closing it [to cars] for six hours on a Sunday."



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Be sure to balance form and function

- The first challenge was convincing local businesses to open their doors on a Sunday. But the events' success helped organizers leap that hurdle. "When they realized that several thousand people were walking in front of their doors, they recognized it's something worth supporting," Ben said.
- The crowd of thousands and the participation of local organizations in providing activities along the route led to another challenge. "With all the activities happening along the route, it's been a balance of form and function — balancing route choice and activities *and* keeping a nice wide lane for people to actually be biking someplace, from their neighborhood to the event or a park or wherever they want to go," Ben explained.
- "[One of] our goals is to provide physical activity and education and the experience of, 'I want to try riding a bike but I don't want to do in traffic,'" Ben said. So providing an environment that facilitates safe, comfortable riding is just as important as programming.

Tailor your messaging to specific audiences

- "We pay constant attention to messaging," Ben emphasized. "The business community needs to know this is an economic engine; city officials need to see the correlation with active transportation; we're also promoting the health aspects to court potential funders; and the whole event has to be engaging to attract attendees. One of the biggest challenges is how to market to the various groups that are interested or we want to see involved."
- As the event has become more popular it's resemblance to "an oversized block party" has become more pronounced. So the organizers have had to differentiate the aim and impact of open streets. "It was a lot of fun but it was less readily apparent how we were improving transportation goals," Ben said. "There were areas that were so busy, so packed, that people had to dismount. They couldn't bike through one or two blocks."
- So, to better meet its goals, the initiative is evolving. In addition to the popular downtown route, a second event will be held in a neighborhood setting. "Even if it's not as popular as the downtown destination, it will be easier in that locale to understand the benefits; to see how neighborhoods are connected to parks, schools, other neighborhoods," Ben said.

Look for cost savings

- "Currently we're almost exclusively privately funded through sponsors, so we're doing everything we can to cut costs," Ben said. "Our highest expenses are barricades and the logistics of closing the street — and then the marketing to attract participant and with businesses."

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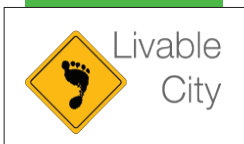
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- One way to trim costs — if it's permissible in your city — is to staff barricades with volunteers, rather than police.
- Another option is finding supporters in the printing and media. “We’ve saved a lot on sponsored printing,” Ben said. “A lot of our maps and posters and other fliers are paid for, in part, by a printing company. That helps a lot. We’re also developing media relationships... After the first event was held radio and TV stations we’re jumping over themselves to get involved. This year we’re going to try to talk to print [media] sponsors, as well.”

Solicit feedback from all stakeholders

- Every step of the way, we evaluate what we’re doing,” Ben said. “We have surveys at every event and we’re sure to reach out especially to business owners about how it worked for them... At each event as it gets more and more popular people are answering the questions saying they see things didn’t know existed, that they’re more comfortable riding their bikes.”

Tips from Susan King:



Sometimes growing up means settling down

- San Francisco had a car-free area in Golden Gate Park before Bogota, Colombia, established its world-renowned ciclovía in 1974. The Sunday Streets initiative, coordinated by Livable City, isn’t quite as old but it’s equally popular, hosting as many as 10 annual car-free events at locations around the city. But in 2011, the initiative is settling in to the Mission district for four, consecutive Sundays.
- “This year we wanted to start digging deep, establishing a permanent route or a regular route somewhere in the city,” Susan said. The Mission district was a perfect fit. The short 2.5-mile route includes a major commercial district in a heavily Latino neighborhood. “Both of the streets are lined with shops,” she said. “Both are very alive and vibrant in an economically successful though low income neighborhood.” Plus, the Mission was also among the most popular locations in past years.

Investigate the impact and acceptance of your initiative

- One of the benefit of settling down is gathering more data. “We’re going to do thorough analysis on the economic impact, tracking sales numbers and looking for trends,” she said. “We’ll also look at some of the negative impacts, like how many complaints were received, or cars towed off the route, and what we think can do to address those to do these events on a regular basis.”



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A repeat route may ease logistics

- By establishing a recurring presence in a single neighborhood organizers may be able to trim their to-do list “We’re looking for ways to create efficiencies along that same route,” Susan said. “We’re hoping to attract a team of dedicated volunteers who can do the same assignment and don’t need to be retrained, but have a sense of what needs to happen at their location.”

Look for partners in the public and private sector

- While Sunday Streets is technically “owned” by the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency, Livable City runs the program on a day-to-day basis, including raising funds and contracting with the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition for volunteers. But having public and private support has been a huge help.
- “The MTA is responsible for traffic safety personnel and the traffic safety equipment, like barricades and cones,” Susan said. “So it’s a good partnership.”
- Add to that, a major sponsorship from Bank of America and Sunday Streets has hit the jackpot of public, private and nonprofit partnership!

Additional resources:

Open Streets Project

<http://www.openstreetsproject.org>