



STAFF REPORT

City Council

Meeting Date:

9/20/2022

Staff Report Number:

22-188-CC

Study Session:

Direction for city hosted events and observances including events based on holidays of religious origin

Recommendation

Staff recommends that the City Council provide direction related to city-hosted community events and observances, including observances based on holidays of religious origin.

Policy Issues

City Council sets policy and goals and provides direction to staff regarding municipal projects and services to the Menlo Park community.

Background

City-owned facilities were closed to indoor public access March 12, 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This precaution was necessary to protect public health by minimizing opportunities for congregation, both by the public and employees. Due to the infeasibility of safely hosting in-person community events during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to comply with public health restrictions set by the County and State, city-hosted in-person community events were suspended during fiscal year 2020-21. Additionally, severe economic hardships predicated by the pandemic resulted in substantial reductions to City revenues, necessitating significant reductions to personnel and operating expenditures, and thus the City's capacity to deliver services to the community, in order to achieve a balanced fiscal year 2020-21 operating budget. City Council took the difficult but positive action to prioritize the City's limited resources in fiscal year 2020-21 to focus on the most critical needs.

On April 27, 2021, the City Council reviewed a phase-in sequence for safely and sustainably expanding access to public facilities and services, including community events and observances. It was noted that large-scale special events, whether indoors or outdoors, result in large, high-density gatherings of people from numerous households that carry the greatest risk of viral spread, and can take several months of advance planning and investment in financial and personnel resources to execute safely and effectively. For these reasons, large-scale events were proposed to be among the last city programs to reactivate.

On December 8, 2021, the Parks and Recreation Commission reviewed an anticipated timeline and format for City-organized community gatherings and observances, including COVID-19 precautions and rules; limited budget and staff capacity for large-scale community gatherings; other resource-intensive priority projects in progress such as the Menlo Park Community Campus opening in 2023; focus on smaller-scale events of fewer than 1,000 attendees in 2022-23; balancing traditions with evolving community needs; showcasing the Menlo Park community through culture, music and the arts; and connecting community events with volunteerism, fundraising, and community action to benefit all Menlo Park residents.

During fiscal year 2021-22, efforts to end the pandemic and achieve economic recovery at the national and local levels achieved some success. Changes to County and State public health restrictions and the advent of COVID-19 vaccines, combined with economic stimulus and recovery, provided the opportunity for City Council to restore and reactivate multiple city programs in the fiscal year 2021-22 operating budget. However, substantial surges in COVID-19 cases, driven by the Delta variant in the third and fourth quarters of 2021, and the Omicron variant in the fourth quarter of 2021 and first quarter of 2022, further delayed the reactivation timeline of other programs, for example gymnastics and large-scale community events, due to ongoing public health and safety concerns.

On June 17, 2022, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authorized emergency use of the Moderna COVID-19 Vaccine and the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine for children as young as six months of age. That authorization ensured that safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines are freely and widely available to the vast majority of residents who are medically eligible.

Analysis

In 2022, the City resumed hosting some community events, starting with smaller-scale events that were expected to attract fewer than 500 attendees and were relatively simple to plan and execute, and for which cancellation would be less impactful in the event of changes in pandemic-related public health guidance. A tentative calendar of city-hosted community events in 2022-23 is included with this report in Attachment A.

Key considerations

Staff seeks policy direction from City Council related to city-hosted community events and observances for the following key considerations:

1. City-hosted events based on holidays of religious origin. Provide policy direction to staff regarding the City's role as a local government agency in hosting, organizing, and using public funds toward community events based on holidays of religious origin, such as events based on the Christmas and Easter holidays.
2. Inclusion and belonging for all Menlo Park residents. Direct staff to use public resources to create events and experiences that are inclusive and foster a sense of belonging for all community members of every background, age, ability, income, religious belief or lack thereof, sexual orientation, and other lived experiences and characteristics that contribute to a vibrant and accepting community.

Holiday tree-lighting

Christmas is a major Christian religious holiday commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ. A national holiday with a long tradition of nationwide observances in the United States, Christmas also is the centerpiece of the busiest retail shopping season of the year. Among the most well-known symbols of the Christmas holiday is the Christmas tree, typically an evergreen tree adorned with lights and other decorations that often includes a star at the apex of the tree symbolizing the Star of Bethlehem, or an angel to symbolize the angels mentioned in the accounts of the Nativity of Jesus. While the Christmas tree as a symbol has evolved in the United States to include some secular connotations, particularly in commercial spheres, it is widely known and recognized to be a symbol of the Christian religious holiday.

The City of Menlo Park has a long-standing annual tradition of adorning a large tree in Fremont Park with decorative lights during the Christmas holiday season, and in recent years also began hanging lights on a large tree at the corner of Newbridge Street and Willow Road. Additionally, the City traditionally has organized and hosted a community event, typically in the first week of December, to celebrate the lighting of the Fremont Park tree, inaugurate the holiday season, and encourage attendees to patronize Menlo Park businesses for their holiday shopping, dining, services and entertainment.

Some community members have expressed the view that the event's emphasis on a traditionally Christian religious symbol – a Christmas tree – is not inclusive to people of faiths other than Christianity or who do not participate in organized religion. Some community members have expressed that the event's focus on Christian symbolism can engender feelings of exclusion from a community event, as they do not feel that their faith or belief system is represented. Additionally, the use of taxpayer-funded public resources to display a traditionally Christian religious symbol in a public space can be seen by some as inconsistent with foundational principles of American secular governance and the separation of church and state.

The holiday tree lighting is a widely cherished local tradition in Menlo Park, and is by no means unique to our community. Governments at every level have and continue to display Christmas trees in public spaces every year, including at the seat of the federal executive branch, The White House. Typically, government-sponsored displays tend to focus on the more secular aspects of the Christmas holiday, such as shopping, feasting, spending time with family and friends, and gift-giving and de-emphasize its more overtly religious aspects. Many governments are careful to also recognize the holidays and observances of other belief systems that occur around the same time of the year as Christmas, for example Hanukkah, Kwanzaa and winter solstice.

Egg Hunt event

Easter is a major Christian holiday that commemorates the biblical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, as described in the New Testament of the Christian Bible. Like Christmas, the Easter holiday has a long tradition of observances in the United States, and it too has become secularized in popular culture to some degree. One of the best-known symbols of this holiday is the Easter egg, which in the Christian religion is associated with Christ's biblical crucifixion and resurrection, and symbolizes the biblical tomb from which Christ emerged. The Easter egg has been popularized in secular American culture through the tradition of the children's Easter egg hunt, which continues to be widely practiced in both private and public settings, including with an annual children's Egg Hunt event in Menlo Park. Considerations about the underlying religious connotations of this City-hosted event are similar to those around the holiday tree lighting.

Recommendations for events based on holidays of religious origin

For the above reasons, staff recommends the City balance local tradition with inclusion and belonging for all residents when hosting events based on holidays of religious origin, as follows:

1. Light Up the Season holiday tree lighting. Focus this event on inclusion for all Menlo Park residents of all faiths and belief systems, including residents who do not participate in organized religion. Continue the longstanding tradition of lighting trees in public spaces at Fremont Park and the Willow/Newbridge intersection to signal the official start of the holiday shopping and celebratory season. Continue to organize and host a community event in Fremont Park to inaugurate the season and ceremonially illuminate the tree. Focus the Fremont Park event on encouraging residents to patronize local businesses to stimulate the local economy and aid small businesses' pandemic recovery efforts during the holidays and year-round. In addition to the tree lighting, staff recommends adding a new feature in the event program for 2022 in which Menlo Park school children from diverse faiths and belief systems share on stage what the holiday season means to them and the many diverse ways Menlo Park families celebrate the season.
2. Egg Hunt. Continue the longstanding tradition of inviting local children and families to engage in the annual springtime activity of hunting for eggs. Focus this event on inclusion for all Menlo Park residents of all faiths and belief systems by incorporating and/or sharing popular elements of spring renewal holidays and celebrations found in diverse cultures around the world, such as Passover, Holi, Ramadan, and vernal equinox. Staff has developed a partnership with San Mateo County Parks to host the 2023 Egg Hunt as well as the 2022 Halloween festival at Flood Park, to leverage the benefits of its 21 acres of

parkland featuring mature native Oak and Bay trees, festival-ready spaces and amenities, ample free parking, and its location in Menlo Park near the US-101 bicycle and pedestrian overcrossing.

Additional considerations for City-hosted events

Informed by previous direction received from City Council and with input from the Parks and Recreation Commission, the Library Commission, and other stakeholders, staff is planning to incorporate the following additional considerations into city-hosted events in 2022-23. Staff seeks City Council's feedback on these considerations as well as any other elements that City Council desires to incorporate into City-hosted events. The following considerations are numbered for convenience only, and are in no particular order or priority:

1. Leverage existing and new partnerships to deliver community events. Potential partners include business associations such as the Chamber of Commerce, service clubs such as Rotary, Lions and Kiwanis, neighborhood advocacy groups such as Belle Haven Action, local agencies such as Menlo Fire and school districts, and community-based organizations and nonprofits.
2. Establish criteria for event partnerships, including roles and responsibilities, cost sharing, staff and financial support, desired goal and outcomes for community events, for example: economic development, small business support, showcasing Menlo Park's attributes, community action and volunteerism, and community pride and spirit.
3. Set clear goals and guidelines for sponsors of community events, including criteria for sponsor recognitions and the process for evaluating sponsorship offers.
4. Evaluate the cost-benefit of mass gatherings such as parades and festivals that carry increased risk and involve substantial investment of city resources in the form of staff capacity, public safety and public works resources, and financial outlay.
5. Align event production with recent revisions to the municipal code related to the special events ordinance, film permits ordinance, and parks and recreation ordinance. One potential example of this consideration is a community event for which an external partner is serving as the lead event organizer in partnership with the City or at the City's request: working with the external partner early in the event planning process to establish clear roles and responsibilities and identify which aspects of the ordinances and/or permit requirements may apply to the event.

Next steps

Staff will incorporate City Council's feedback and direction into the planning process for city-hosted events, and will report back to City Council for additional direction and potential budget authorizations, if needed, in the context of the midyear budget review tentatively in January/February 2023.

Impact on City Resources

A summary of the estimated impacts to City resources of City-hosted events in 2022-23 is in Attachment A. City-hosted events and observances typically require substantial outlays of public resources in the form of staff time/effort and out-of-pocket expenditures. Estimated total out-of-pocket expenditures for city-hosted events in fiscal year 2022-23 are \$143,000, which includes an estimated \$55,000 to install holiday lights on large trees in Fremont Park and at the corner of Newbridge/Willow. Estimated total staff time and effort needed to produce city-hosted events in fiscal year 2022-23 is approximately 600-800 staff hours. City Council's adopted fiscal year 2022-23 operating budget includes sufficient resources allocated to support these costs.

Environmental Review

This action is not a project within the meaning of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines §§ 15378 and 15061(b)(3) as it will not result in any direct or indirect physical change in the

Environment.

Public Notice

Public notification was achieved by posting the agenda, with the agenda items being listed, at least 72 hours prior to the meeting.

Attachments

A. Tentative calendar of city-hosted community events in 2022-23

Report prepared by:

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Sean Reinhart, Library and Community Services Director

FY 2022-23 CITY-SPONSORED EVENTS - PARTIAL TENTATIVE CALENDAR

** All dates and event listings are tentative and subject to change **

List does not include:

- Small scale programs routinely hosted by senior center, library, childcare centers, and other City divisions.
- Events hosted by third parties (for example: Bon Marche, Wine Walk, Off the Grid, etc.)

2022					
Date (tentative)	Community event	Proposed location/s	Estimated staff time/effort*	Estimated City expenditures (not including staff costs)	Estimated number of attendees
Jul 13	Summer Concert #1	Fremont Park	low	\$5,500	280
Jul 20	Summer Concert #2	Fremont Park	low	\$5,500	180
Jul 27	Summer Concert #3	Fremont Park	low	\$5,500	150
Aug 3	Summer Concert #4	Fremont Park	low	\$5,500	230
Aug 10	Summer Concert #5	Fremont Park	low	\$5,500	250
Aug 17	Summer Concert #6	Fremont Park	low	\$5,500	500
Aug 19	Summer Concert #7	Belle Haven School Field	low	\$5,500	130
Aug 26	Summer Concert #8	Belle Haven School Field	low	\$5,500	110
Sep 24	Belle Haven resource fair	Belle Haven School Field	high	\$5,500	400
Oct 30	Halloween celebration	Flood Park (in partnership with San Mateo County Parks)	high	\$7,500	600
Nov TBD	Tree light installation	Fremont Park + Newbridge/Willow	low	\$55,000	-
Dec 2	Light up the Season event	Fremont Park	high	\$7,500	600
2023					
Jan 21	Winter movie	M-A Performing Arts Center	low	\$500	100
Feb 25	Winter movie	M-A Performing Arts Center	low	\$500	100
Feb 2023	Black History Month celebration	Burgess Park + Belle Haven School Field	medium	\$2,500	250
Feb TBD	Youth Poetry Contest	City Council Chambers	medium	\$500	200
Mar 25	Summer Camp resource fair	Burgess Park + Belle Haven School Field	medium	\$1,000	150
Apr 8	Egg Hunt	Flood Park (in partnership with San Mateo County Parks)	very high	\$7,500	800
May TBD	Youth Poster Exhibition	Main Library + Belle Haven Branch	medium	\$500	100
Jun 17	Juneteenth celebration	Belle Haven School Field	medium	\$3,000	250
July 4	Independence Day parade	Santa Cruz Ave	very high	\$7,500	1,000+
TBD	MPCC grand opening	MPCC + Kelly Park	very high	TBD	800
TOTAL FY 2022-23				\$143,000	

* Staff time to plan/execute events is estimated as follows: Low = 1-20 total hours staff time. Medium = 21-40 hours. High = 41-60 hours. Very high = 61+ hours.