



Keeping  
Everyone  
Safe

# **Communication, Planning Help Townships Ensure Safety During Special Events**

BY BRENDA WILT / ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Many townships are home to fairs, festivals, and other special events throughout the year, and any time the public gathers for such an occasion, safety is an issue. Good communication and early planning can help townships ensure that these events are safe and successful for everyone.

**S**afety. That's the top priority for townships when special events take place within their borders.

"What you don't want to have happen at any event you are hosting is to have someone get hurt," says Karen Versuk, public information officer for Penn Township in Chester County.

Versuk's township holds an annual community picnic and health fair in partnership with a local hospital. In planning the event, Versuk engages the local police and fire departments, emergency medical services, and other necessary entities to ensure the safety of everyone in attendance.

Most events that take place in townships, from farmers markets, fairs, and arts and craft shows to Halloween corn mazes and Christmas light displays, are unregulated. In fact, amendments to the state's Uniform Construction Code have specifically exempted the kinds

of temporary structures usually seen at these types of affairs. That doesn't mean township officials can just rest on their laurels, though.

"Those exceptions do not remove the township's responsibility to plan so the event is safe," says Rich Piccolo, president of B&F Technical Code Services in Illinois.

Piccolo, who has presented workshops for the Pennsylvania Construction Codes Academy, says that proper planning is the key to safe, successful events. Townships that host such attractions or celebrations agree and say that good planning is not just about logistics — when and where the event will take place. It must also include a careful look at all aspects, from parking to first aid to security.

### What the regulations say

When the Uniform Construction Code was enacted in 1999, it required permits and inspections for all tempo-



When Upper Merion Township in Montgomery County hosts a special event, such as this concert in the park, the codes department works closely with the police and fire departments to make sure the gathering is safe for everyone. (Photo courtesy of the township.)

# SPECIAL EVENT PLANNING

rary-use structures that involved the general public. Act 39 of 2007, however, created an exception for temporary structures that are:

- erected for fairs, flea markets, arts and craft festivals, or other public celebrations;
- less than 1,600 square feet in size;
- erected for less than 30 days; and
- not a swimming pool, spa, or hot tub.

Municipalities that want to have some control over these structures may regulate them only with respect to:

- the flame propagation criteria (*how fast fire spreads on various types of fabrics*) in the National Fire Protection Association's standards,
- electrical safety as spelled out in the International Electrical Code, and
- the required number of fire extin-



**Advance planning and communication between all departments are crucial to making sure that safety is considered for all aspects of community events. (Photo courtesy of Penn Township, Chester County.)**

guishers, as provided for in the International Fire Code.

Act 39 also exempts pole barns from all UCC requirements except electrical if they are built on agricultural fairgrounds and used only for storage and public display of agricultural animals.

What does all of this mean for townships? For the average township event, such as a community day fair or celebration, where there may be tents or canopies and other temporary structures, the building code doesn't really apply because of the exceptions noted above.

However, even if structures are exempt from codes, townships should make safety considerations part of their planning process for special events. For example, it's a good idea to get a code official involved and have a qualified person check any electrical connections, says Bob Buddenbohn, an instructor for the Pennsylvania Construction Codes Academy.

Townships should also consider traffic control, extra police or security personnel, and fire and emergency services, he says.

"It really depends on what the event is as far as who needs to be involved," Buddenbohn adds.

### Assigning responsibility

Rich Piccolo of B&F Technical Code Services urges townships to do as much planning upfront as possible.

"You need to ask yourself, what resources do we need and who has them?" he says. "You need to look at the overall volume. The bigger an event gets, the bigger the potential problems."

Piccolo suggests that for larger events, townships should make sure

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**“The bigger an event gets, the bigger the potential problems.”**

they have enough police to handle traffic, fire department personnel on standby or on-site for emergencies, and public works employees to install or move temporary traffic control devices.

“A major event is a good time for townships to practice their NIMS [National Incident Management System] strategy,” he says. “It doesn’t just have to be for a major disaster. A smaller event can be a good opportunity to see how everything works together.”

During the event planning process, townships should assess the level of risk and then designate the proper people to mitigate that risk, Piccolo says. The event coordinators should assign specific tasks to specific individuals so that everyone knows who is responsible for what.

“With proper planning, things should go off without a hitch,” he says.

John Baker, a certified protection professional who works as a safety and security manager and school police detective for the Lancaster-Lebanon Intermediate Unit, suggests four areas that should receive consideration in the early planning stages of a large event:

**1) On-site medical and fire services.**

This could be a local ambulance company that remains on standby in exchange for a donation or a private emergency medical service that is contracted to provide care.

“Everything from sprains, abrasions, and lacerations to heart-related events and life-threatening illnesses and accidents can occur,” Baker says. “Timely medical care is crucial, particularly if

the event is large enough to impede surrounding roads or the layout of the event is complex.

“There is no substitute for having someone on the scene with a radio that connects directly to county 911 and fellow first responders,” he adds.

**2) Law enforcement.**

“The important thing to remember about law enforcement is to get them involved early and be willing to make last-minute changes as world events, potential threats, or intelligence develops,” Baker says.

**3) Pre-event briefing for staff, volunteers, and first responders.**

“It’s amazing how many events happen and the staff is never briefed on how to handle the simplest of emergency situations,” Baker says. “Good event



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planning includes a briefing for every shift on each day of the event.”

Baker says event workers should be instructed on such things as:

- where to send people for medical care;
- how to report unusual or suspicious behavior;
- what to do if violence erupts and everyone starts fleeing the immediate area; and
- what is expected of volunteers in an emergency situation, such as reporting to a rallying spot.

#### 4) Perimeter fencing and security.

Everyone understands the need to create small entry gates to collect tickets or pay admission fees, Baker says, but funneled entrances become a problem when the 5,000 people who trickled in over two to three hours all want to leave at the same time when an emergency situation arises.

“Arrangements should be made for large sections of perimeter fencing to be hinged and able to open for emergency evacuation,” he says. “So often the majority of injuries in these cases occur due to the stampede of people and not the emergency itself.”

#### Communication is key

Townships that host special events have tackled these issues in a variety of ways. Some, like Upper Merion Township in Montgomery County, have ordinances that require event organizers to apply for permits. This ensures that the township is aware of the size and nature of the event and whether police or other services will be necessary.

John Waters, chief fire marshal and director of safety and code enforcement for Upper Merion Township, says that good communication between the codes department and police makes it much easier to ensure public safety at special events.

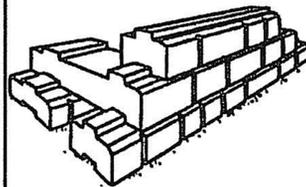
Whenever the codes department becomes aware of a pending event in the township, it does a risk assessment covering various issues, from the purpose and expected number of attendees to electrical and plumbing work that may be involved. If the event calls for tents, they are evaluated for capacity and exit requirements, as well as fire-related issues.

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The most important element of planning is communication, Waters says.

"If the code department learns about an event on the horizon, we let the police know about it," he says. "If they get a permit application from the manager, they tell us."

Upper Merion Township is home to the King of Prussia Mall, one of the largest indoor shopping malls in the country, as well as the Valley Forge Convention Center. The township does not get involved with events at the convention center because "special events are what the center does," Waters says.

Events at the mall will get some attention, however. For example, a beer fest last fall that involved a tent in the parking lot received scrutiny, he says.

"We treat tents like temporary buildings," he says. "We look at the number and width of exits to make sure they are adequate for the tent's capacity. We also make sure the tent is located far enough away from mall entrances to not create a nuisance or hazard."

The mall parking lot has plenty of space, he says, as long as the event does not take place between Thanksgiving and the week after New Year's.

The police department will also consider potential impacts on traffic and plan accordingly.

"When you're dealing with a mall, convention center, or other facility, you need to establish a relationship with the property owners so they will get in touch with you when an event is scheduled," Waters says.

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**When planning a public event, organizers must also consider the safety of the entertainers. "You need to be thinking outside of the box, considering who is going to be there and what they are going to be doing," Karen Versuk of Penn Township, Chester County, says. (Photo courtesy of the township.)**

Other events in the township require different considerations. A yearly church carnival, for example, has mostly electrical issues, Waters says. The township makes sure that an inspection is done on all connections and to look for tripping hazards, such as cords extending across walking paths, and anything else that might affect safety.

Depending on the size and nature of the event, a formal NIMS incident action plan may be necessary, he says. For example, the annual township-hosted fireworks display requires such a plan, which spells out in great detail the scope and nature of the event, the po-

tential impacts, and who is responsible for all of the elements that go into the pyrotechnic display.

The township also developed an incident action plan for a recent "die-in" at the mall protesting police violence, Waters says.

"As soon as the police received intelligence on the protest, they contacted the fire and codes departments so we could talk about what we needed to do," he says.

The township planned for potential traffic issues, as well as general disruption at the mall.

What may seem like overkill in a

**"With proper planning, things should go off without a hitch."**



small, rural township is necessary to ensure safety and security in a community the size of Upper Merion, Water says.

"You can't not think about it," he says.

### Keeping everyone safe

In her 11<sup>th</sup> year of organizing Penn Township's annual community picnic and health fair, Karen Versuk has seen the need for safety planning grow along with the event.

"I increasingly include others, such as the fire company, fire police, and ambulance services, in the initial planning stages," Versuk says.

The township is in a rather unique position because the hospital is right next to the park where the picnic is held. Since it's a health and wellness fair, plenty of medical services representatives are on hand in case of emergencies, including ambulances.

Nevertheless, there are other safety issues that must be addressed, such as parking and traffic control.

"Our biggest challenge over the years has been parking, especially handicapped parking," Versuk says.

By moving the parking for attendees from the township building's small lot on one side of the park to the hospital's lot on the other side, closer to the park entrance, the township was able to designate a number of spaces for handicapped users, she says. The township lot is restricted for use by food preparers and entertainers.

Attendees, who usually number 3,000 to 5,000, park in the hospital lot and adjacent field and, when those fill up, across the street at the YMCA. To keep traffic and pedestrians moving smoothly and safely, the township relies on the West Grove Fire Company's fire police.

Abundant signage, beginning a mile away from the park, alerts drivers to potential delays and possible pedestrian traffic.

At the event itself, the township makes sure everything involving the food is done according to health department standards, Versuk says. The cooking area is in a lower corner of the park, separated from the flow of foot traffic. The dining tent is also located away from the cooking area.

Vendors or exhibitors who require

## SAFE SPACES

### Conference workshop will teach townships how to create safe meeting spaces

Township officials and staff who want to ensure the safety of visitors to township facilities may attend the workshop titled "Creating a Safe and Positive Meeting Space for Public and Private Events," scheduled for Tuesday, April 21, during PSATS' 93<sup>rd</sup> Annual Educational Conference and Trade Show at the Hershey Lodge.

Certified protection professional John Baker, safety and security manager and school police detective for Lancaster-Lebanon Intermediate Unit 13, will use crime prevention through environmental design concepts to help townships design small and large meeting spaces that promote positive behavior. A former West Lampeter Township supervisor, Baker will also cover techniques to remain safe when hostile or violent intruders appear, from furniture selection and placement to de-escalation techniques and strategies for fleeing, barricading, or engaging.

For more information and to register for the conference, go to **conference.psats.org**. (Please note that conference workshop times are subject to change. Check the conference program book when you arrive at the conference.)

electrical service are placed near receptacles at the park, Versuk says.

"We lay out everything a week in advance to make sure no electrical cords will cross walking paths," she says.

The park's five gazebos, which have electric service, make good locations for several of the participants, including Jungle John and his reptiles.

"The gazebo can be roped off, and people can sit around it in a semicircle," Versuk says. "That way, he has his own space where he can remain for the whole day."

Sometimes the entertainers bring their own set of safety issues. For several years, the Philadelphia Eagles cheerleaders have been a popular attraction at the event, Versuk says. However, their popularity can create a security risk as people jostle for photos and autographs.

"We got volunteers from the criminal justice program at Chester County Technical College High School to provide 'bodyguard' service for the cheerleaders," Versuk says. "They keep everyone orderly and really take care of

the women, who are very appreciative.

"You need to be thinking outside of the box, considering who is going to be there and what they are going to be doing," she adds. "You have to anticipate what they might need."

The township's experience with this annual event has had a fringe benefit, Versuk says.

"It prompted us to draft rules for park use to keep everyone safe," she says. "For example, the fire police must be involved for traffic control for any event with more than 100 people. It has really forced us to step back and look at events and what we need to do in terms of safety."

In the end, that is what all townships need to do, regardless of who is holding the event. Providing for the health and safety of its residents is one of a township's primary responsibilities, and special events are no exception, regardless of regulations. Communication between departments, early planning, and common sense can go a long way toward making special events safe and successful for all involved. ♦