



SPECIAL EVENTS SUPPORT PROGRAM

2026 Guidelines



THE CITY OF
COLUMBUS
ANDREW J. GINTHER, MAYOR

RECREATION AND PARKS
DEPARTMENT

PURPOSE

In 2017, the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department launched the Special Events Support Program (SESP) to create a more efficient, merit-based and transparent process for funding special events in the City of Columbus.

This process seeks to formalize the various types of requests that the City currently receives on a year-round, rolling basis by establishing annual funding cycles. The funding cycle will be **April 1, 2026, through December 31, 2026**. The City will make funding decisions in early spring.

The program provides funding in five categories to Columbus-based organizations who have an established reputation for success and credibility, enhance the City's overall cultural environment, support the local economic vitality and increase the visibility and reputation of the City of Columbus as a desirable destination for visitors. An event is defined as a planned social function, occurring either one-time, on an annual basis or as part of a series.

The City is committed to fostering, cultivating and preserving a culture of diversity, equity and inclusion. Events that celebrate a community, neighborhood, local heritage and/or cultural experiences through the presence of live performances, food and merchandise, and/or interactive exhibits are eligible for funding if they are held in public spaces and are open to the public.

It is the intention of the City to encourage the production of free special events that enhance the quality of life, provide low-cost entertainment and other leisure activities, and contribute to the dynamic atmosphere of the community.

Support from the SESP is contingent on the approval of the City's annual budget and completion of all required proposals and agreements as well as follow-up reporting on the part of the applying organizations. Prior success in receiving an award is no guarantee that an organization will be awarded future funding. Even though an event may qualify, limited funds may not allow all events to receive financial support from the City. Events may not receive the full amount of funding that they are seeking based on program budget and event eligibility.

PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

The CRPD's Office of Special Events administers the program, including advertising the availability of funds, providing technical assistance to applicants, coordinating the review process, and distributing funds. Questions regarding the application process or the program may be directed to:

Corinne Taylor
CRPD Office of Special Events
1111 East Broad Street, Suite 101
Columbus, Ohio 43205
614-645-3033 or cltaylor@columbus.gov

DEADLINE

Formal proposals are due via email by **March 27, 2026**. Please email applications to cltaylor@columbus.gov. Additional details are outlined under Proposal Requirements. Any submission that includes an incomplete proposal or insufficient supporting documentation may be eliminated from consideration.

ELIGIBILITY

To be eligible, an organization **must** submit an online proposal along with **ALL** required documents by the deadline and **must** meet the following conditions:

- 1-3 year history of event production in Columbus (categories A, B, C and D only)
- Be legally incorporated as a not-for-profit corporation under Section 501 (c) of the United States Internal Revenue Code
- Recognized by the State of Ohio as an active non-profit organization, or working in partnership with an eligible fiscal agent
- Organization must supply a valid federal tax ID number with IRS tax determination letter
- Event must take place on publicly owned property located within the City of Columbus
- Event takes place between April 1, 2026, through December 31, 2026
- Event is conducted for the purpose of providing residents of the City of Columbus with safe opportunities to recreate
- Event organization or principal officer must be located within the City of Columbus
- Event is not conducted as a fundraiser, intended to convey a religious message nor advocate a political position
- Event must be non-commercial in nature (primary purpose may not be to sell a product or service)
- Organization is not a division/department within the City of Columbus
- Organization demonstrates the ability to solicit sponsorship and/or other non-city funding to sustain the event
- The dollar amount requested may not exceed 50% of the projected funding support, sponsorship, or in-kind support secured from other sources
- Obtain and maintain all necessary licenses, permits and insurance as required by City's event permit policies
- Adheres to all health and safety guidelines to maintain a safe environment for attendees and staff
- Only one proposal per year will be accepted from an applicant/organization; Proposals may be for one event or series of events with a consistent format
- Event organization or event organizer must not have any outstanding balances or performance issues with any City department from previous events

INELIGIBLE EVENTS

- Events managed or coordinated by a City employee or their immediate family
- Events coordinated by any City of Columbus department, office or partnership organization, including municipal authorities, quasi-governmental entities, or non-profits established by or under governance of the City
- Events planned primarily for a fundraising or commercial purpose or where participants must pay to participate or to experience the primary features of the event
- Moving events with a set or suggested individual participation fee
- Events with a set or suggested individual participation fee
- Events in which the primary purpose is issuing scholarships or redistribution of event revenue
- Activities restricted to members only
- Private events not open to the public
- Any event taking place on private property or at a residence
- Virtual and online events

- Trade shows, ceremonies, conventions, conferences, job fairs, workshops, etc.
- Residential block parties
- National Night Out events
- Annual luncheons, holiday parties, birthday parties, Baraats, anniversaries and other private celebrations
- Family reunions and picnics
- College, church, school or sporting events
- Fitness/personal training classes
- Events that have a history of sustained complaints from previous years
- Events held outside of the corporation limits of Columbus
- Events where the primary function of the event is an ineligible event (timed moving event, block party, fundraiser, etc.)

MAXIMUM REQUEST LEVELS

- Category A Applicants = Up to \$5,000
- Category B Applicants = Up to \$4,000
- Category C Applicants = Up to \$3,000
- Category D Applicants = Up to \$2,000
- Category E Applicants = Up to \$1,000

Awards are intended to serve as partial support for an event, not the only source. Awards may not serve as more than 50% of the total funding support for any event.

FUNDING CATEGORIES

Eligibility for funding consideration is defined under five categories. Applicant organizations must meet these minimum requirements:

Category A (Regional Impact)

- A total annual budget of at least \$200,000
- Event has taken place for at least fifteen consecutive years
- Effective marketing strategies for regional markets beyond Columbus Metro Area
- Generates a minimum of \$75,000 in cash sponsorships, grants or private sources
- Attendance greater than 75,000

Category B (Citywide Impact)

- A total average annual budget of at least \$100,000
- Event has taken place for at least ten consecutive years
- Effective marketing strategies for citywide market within Columbus Metro Area
- Generates a minimum of \$50,000 in cash sponsorships, grants or private sources
- Attendance between 25,000- 75,000

Category C (Community Impact)

- A total average annual budget of at least \$20,000
- Event has taken place for at least five consecutive years

- Effective marketing strategies for neighborhood or community within Columbus
- Generates a minimum of \$10,000 in cash sponsorships, grants or private sources
- Attendance between 10,000-25,000

Category D (Neighborhood Impact)

- A total average annual budget of at least \$8,000
- Event has taken place for at least three consecutive years
- Effective marketing strategies for neighborhoods or communities within Columbus
- Generates a minimum of \$4,000 in cash sponsorships, grants or private sources
- Attendance up to 10,000

Category E (First Time Impact)

- No minimum budget, attendance or vendors required
- New and innovative events will be considered
- Events are eligible to receive up to 50% of their total funding support, with a maximum award of \$1,000

ELIGIBILITY SCREENING

CRPD Office of Special Events staff will review all proposals for completeness and eligibility. Staff will separate eligible proposals into categories based on the event budget, venue footprint, number of vendors, event marketing strategies, funding sources and attendance. Proposals that pass this initial review will then be evaluated for their strengths by a separate SESP Review Panel.

SESP REVIEW PANEL

The SESP Review Panel members are appointed by the Director of the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department and consists of representatives from City Council, Recreation and Parks Commission and the Mayor's Office. The SESP Review Panel will evaluate proposals and determine funding levels.

ELIGIBLE EXPENSES

- Event production costs
- Equipment rental
- Expendable supplies/materials
- Marketing
- Printing
- Publications
- Venue rental
- Security
- First aid
- Current year city services and permitting fees

INELIGIBLE EXPENSES- You may note these expenses, but they will not be counted towards your budget

- Proposal preparation
- Staff salaries and benefits

- Performer fees/costs
- Travel or transportation costs
- Beauty or talent contests
- Hospitality costs (food, beverages, decorations)
- Charitable donations
- Cash awards, honoraria/speaking fees, incentives, prizes or plaques
- Scholarships
- Fees, fines or penalties
- Interest payments on loans
- Reduction of deficits
- Rental of commercial storage space
- Capital improvements
- Previous years' city invoices/bills

PROPOSAL REQUIREMENTS

Please submit a proposal online, following the outline below. There will be spaces in the application where you are able to upload additional information to support the application.

Event Background

- List organization's history, mission, goals and contact information
- List any other organizations that are event collaborators or partners
- Describe the purpose and objectives of the event
- List the date that the event was founded, the current dates and venue locations
- How many years has the event been held and average attendance
- Identify the event's target audiences, demographics, and whether patrons are local or visitors
- What makes your event unique
- What cultural and/or educational impact will your event have on the community and how will it demonstrate its unique diversity, history and heritage
- How does this event enhance pride and a sense of community
- Give details of the event including duration, hours, anticipated street closures, number of vendors, type of vendors, activities for patrons, number of stages, type of performances, etc.

Event's Value & Benefits

- Discuss the district/neighborhood the event takes place in and if applicable, include evidence of that area's support for the event
- Explain the economic benefit/impact the event has on the City of Columbus
- Amount of city sponsorship you are requesting
- Explain the anticipated benefits to both the organization and the City if funded
- Other sources of funding for the event, including any in-kind support
- List all potential or secured event sponsors
- List all grants, either secured or in process, including the amount
- Describe additional fundraising efforts being implemented for the event
- Marketing and promotional benefits for the City
- What steps will you take to implement and promote the event?

- Results/positive outcomes expected from the event
- How success or anticipated outcomes of the event are measured

REVIEW CRITERIA

- Overall event concept and purpose
- Clarity of event's nature, structure and vision
- Feasibility of the event
- Organization's capacity to successfully hold the event
- Names and titles of event organizers
- Community support for the event
- Extent of local or regional marketing efforts
- The need for City funds vs. the applicant's ability to leverage other funding
- A detailed budget of all expenses and sources of income for the entire event
- Ability to enhance community engagement, cultural diversity, and attract visitors
- Effectiveness at reinforcing and promoting Columbus' positive image
- Strategy to grow and have lasting power as an event
- Marketing plan and use of social media
- Economic impact potential
- Environmental impact
- Method of measuring attendance and demographics
- Cooperation with City departments
- Overall quality of proposal

Proposal Support Documents

- Include copies of the following required documents:
 - IRS letter of non-profit tax-exempt status
 - List of Board of Directors/Officers and their affiliation
 - Current year event budget
 - Most recent financial statement (not tax return or year-end audit)
- Listing of other City of Columbus departments where you are also seeking funding or support (Mayor's Office, City Council, Department of Neighborhoods, Office of Violence Prevention, etc.)
- Include a signed statement that all City bills will be paid in the current year

One (1) SIGNED original proposal or one (1) electronic submission with required attachments (items listed above) must be submitted for consideration.

PROPOSAL TIMELINE

- Submit proposal via email by **March 27, 2026**
- Funding amount determined and awarded by SESP Review Panel
- All applicants are notified of the results of their funding requests by April 3rd
- Register as a city vendor online at <http://vendors.columbus.gov>
- Agreement signed by both parties
- An invoice must be submitted for payment to occur
- A city check should be processed within 60 days after agreement is signed
- Approved City logos will be provided for marketing materials

- Status reports must be submitted showing the City listed as an event sponsor

FINAL REPORT

A final report is required from each event receiving funding 90 days post-event and must be submitted by December 31st. The final report should include:

- A typed summary of the event (minimum of one page)
- Attendance figures, number of vendors and volunteers
- A budget for the event, including details/breakdown of revenues, expenses and how SESP funds were used
- Samples of advertising or promotional materials including tear sheets, photographs, videos, etc.
- A list of media coverage and sponsors
- A list of organizations that benefitted financially from the event
- Proposed improvements or adjustments for next year
- Economic impact statement, if available
- Audience demographic breakdown

FUNDING STIPULATIONS

- All submitted proposals become the exclusive property of the City and a matter of public record.
- If the award is less than the amount requested, the applicant may choose to cancel the event and must notify the CRPD Office of Special Events. If the event is held, the applicant may decide to reduce the scope and scale of the event but must notify the CRPD Office of Special Events of all changes.
- In the event a recipient chooses to decline SESP funds that have already been allocated or decides to cancel the event, all funds must be returned immediately.
- Failure to use SESP funds as specified in the signed agreement shall result in penalties up to and including a full refund of grant amount.
- Failure to submit a final report by December 31st shall result in the applicant not being allowed to submit a proposal in the following year of the funding cycle.
- Organizations cannot transfer SESP funds from one event to another event or a charitable organization without a written request and approval by the City.
- Organizations that do not comply with all deadlines and procedures are ineligible to receive SESP funding in future years.

NOTE: The review committee is guided by the review criteria. No one attribute is controlling. As the City has limited public resources available and is the steward of those funds, it is in the City's sole discretion to determine which events it sponsors, if its sponsorship recurs year to year, and if the level of sponsorship increases or decreases.

CITY OBLIGATION

The City of Columbus and the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department are only financial contributors to the event, not a promoter or co-producer of the event. The City will not be liable for any debts incurred for the event. In making an award, the City does not assume any liability or responsibility for the ultimate financial success of the event.

Revised 3/17/2026