

Promoting Nightlife Culture & Great Places



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Planning for Nightlife and Entertainment: Promoting Nightlife Culture and Great Places

Nightlife, entertainment, arts, culture, and live music help make cities unique and authentic. They attract companies and tourism, celebrate local culture, and build community. They are often multi-billion-dollar economic impact engines for cities.

Nightlife culture also makes cities great places where people want to live, and makes our lives in those cities nourishing and fulfilling. We need to ensure that independent nightlife can thrive in cities, and that planning policies allow and encourage it.

So, what makes a great street, place or neighborhood, and how does nightlife culture contribute? A great place has timeless design characteristics like being walkable and human scale with pleasant streets, thoughtful streetscape design and public spaces. Beyond design though it has independent and innovative businesses that reflect the local community and a diverse mix of uses where people can stroll, shop, eat, drink, and hang out. And while all those are all necessary, they are still not sufficient, because really great places have restaurants, bars and cafes, outdoor drinking and dining, music venues, performance spaces and art galleries.

It is ultimately rich independent nightlife culture, arts and music, and a strong sense of community that make places vibrant and cool.

If we know that innovative independent businesses and nightlife culture is what makes great places, how can cities at least ensure that their planning and development policies are not preventing this from happening and ideally proactively allowing and encouraging it to develop organically?

Cities' land use and zoning policies related to nightlife often create unnecessary barriers for key components of great places (music venues, theaters etc.) to start up. For example, in many cities a business that serves alcohol for on-site consumption is always defined as a bar or cocktail lounge and there are no other options. Since many cities also have special zoning and/or special use permits required to open a bar, that can make it a challenge to open. Music venues serve alcohol, but their primary reason for being is to present live music. Similarly, why would a theater that presents live performances and serves alcohol in the lobby need to be defined as a bar? Shouldn't an innovative concept like a vintage book store with a wine bar be easy to open? Here are a couple of examples of proactive solutions. In Austin, the City recently adopted a [new land use category called Performance Venue](#) that allows music venues and theaters that serve alcohol, but without the special zoning required for bars. In Philadelphia the City recently updated the [definition of nightclubs](#) to ensure that restaurants with DJ's or bands, or places with limited live music aren't considered nightclubs.

Cities often utilize zoning changes and special use permits to attempt to manage conflicts between nightlife establishments and residents, or public safety, or perceived risks of disorder, but these tools are too static, and are not the best way to manage operational issues. In practice these policies are often too broad and just serve as a way to prevent nightlife, or they are too detailed and specific, overly restrictive and too difficult to modify as business models, tastes and trends change. Special use permits may still be necessary as one component to manage compatibility, but overall cities should be working towards allowing more types of nightlife uses and activities without the need for zoning changes and conditional use permits, and instead focusing on administrative nightlife management strategies for compatibility and conflict resolution that are more flexible and effective. Here are a few examples:

Sound Management

Nightlife can include increased levels of sound in the environment. However, vibrant streets and places often have residential uses and need to maintain livability. Cities can support both vibrant nightlife and residential quality of life, but it takes a proactive focus and effort, including a thoughtful and comprehensive sound management strategy. An effective strategy includes an approach tailored to nightlife, is customized based on locations and contexts, provides predictability and balances vibrancy and quality of life. For a deeper dive on this topic check out my paper on [Planning for Entertainment-Related Sound](#)

Nightlife District Management

Nightlife is vibrant and energetic and districts with a high concentration of nightlife activity can require additional proactive management strategies around things like safety and security, public space design and management, and transportation. Dedicated and specially trained entertainment police units, civilian ambassadors, non-profit organization activations focusing on safe consumption and harm reduction, pedestrian and lighting enhancements, and rideshare pickup and drop off coordination are just a few of the strategies cities are using to proactively manage entertainment districts.

Providing Training, Support, Guidance and Resources

Through nightlife establishment training programs and accreditation programs, cities are providing training, support, guidance and resources to bars, clubs and venues, serving as partners to elevate operating standards, recognizing good practices, and proactively preventing and resolving issues. Sacramento, Austin, Dallas, Nashville, Pittsburgh and New York are just a few of cities providing active shooter response, stop the bleed, de-escalation, overdose awareness and Narcan administration, drink spiking awareness, sexual assault and harassment prevention, and door staff training for bars, clubs and venues.

Coordination, Mediation and Problem Solving

One of the primary roles of a nightlife management office that is most common across all of the offices in the US is a focus on the liaison role to the nightlife industry and stakeholders. They serve as the primary liaison between nightlife establishments, residents and city departments to promote vibrant and successful nightlife, help establishments solve permitting and regulatory issues, facilitate inter-agency coordination, develop and coordinate solutions and policy changes, mediate and solve conflicts and more. For more on the liaison role, check out this [NITECAP blog post](#).

By allowing more types of nightlife uses and activities without the need for zoning changes and conditional use permits, and instead focusing on nightlife management strategies for compatibility and conflict resolution, cities can encourage the innovative independent businesses and nightlife culture that makes streets, places and neighborhoods vibrant, and cities great and fulfilling places to live, while also effectively managing nightlife.