



Best Practice: Improving Public Spaces

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CITY: NEW YORK CITY

POLICY AREAS: PARKS & GREEN SPACES; TRANSPORTATION

BEST PRACTICE

The New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) has initiated the **NYC Plaza Program** to invite community groups to partner with DOT in reclaiming underutilized portions of streets and sidewalks to rebuild them as larger, improved public spaces. Eligible not-for-profit organizations are invited to propose locations for the design and construction of new plazas and then partner with the city in constructing and maintaining the space. The program is a key part of the City's effort to ensure that all New Yorkers live within a 10-minute walk of quality open space.

ISSUE

Streets make up approximately 25% of the City's land area and yet, outside of parks, there are few places to sit, rest, socialize, and enjoy public life.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The goal of the NYC Plaza Program is to improve the quality of life for New Yorkers by creating more public open space. The City prioritizes sites that are in neighborhoods that lack open space, and partners with community groups that commit to operate, manage, and maintain these spaces as vibrant pedestrian plazas. The city aims to have constructed one public space in each of the city's 59 community districts between 2008 and 2020.

In addition to creating new public spaces, by supporting local not-for-profit s, the NYC Plaza Program aims to strengthen the capacity of these local level organizations to help them become stronger long-term plaza partners.

IMPLEMENTATION

The NYC Plaza Program is a competitive, community-based application program that allows not-for-profit organizations to propose plaza sites to DOT. Eligible applicants identify plaza sites within the public right of way – streets and sidewalks – and agree to become the stewards of the public space through an agreement with DOT to maintain, program, and manage the plaza.

The NYC Plaza Program is open to all not-for-profit organizations in any area of the City. Applicants must be:

- Not-for-profit organizations operating in any of the five boroughs of New York City;
- Incorporated in New York State and compliant with annual State and Federal filing requirements for not-for-profit organizations;
- Certified tax exempt under Internal Revenue Service Code Section 501(c); and
- Located near the geographical target area of the proposed plaza.

Sites are selected based on the following criteria: open space, community initiative, site context, organizational and maintenance capacity, and income eligibility. The program is funded through the City's capital budget and includes various agencies, including the Department of Parks of Recreation, Department of Small Business Services, Department of Design and Construction, Department of Cultural Affairs, Department of City Planning, and the Economic Development Corporation.

If the site is selected, the City provides the following support:

- DOT will fund the design and construction of the plaza.
- DOT and its not-for-profit partner organization will conduct a public hearing to develop a conceptual design that is appropriate to the scale and character of the neighborhood and responsive to the needs of the community.
- A professional design team, including the Department of Design and Construction, will then base its plans on feedback from the public to incorporate in the conceptual and final design; the not-for-profit partner organization will be involved throughout the design process.



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- Possible amenities may include tables and seating, trees and plants, lighting, public art, and drinking fountains.
- As needed, DOT will monitor and inspect the plazas to assess and confirm that the not-for-profit partner organizations are fulfilling their responsibility as set forth in the agreement with DOT.

Not-for-profit partner organizations will be responsible for the following:

- **Maintenance:** Before construction is complete, the not-for-profit partner organization will enter into an agreement with DOT for the maintenance of the plaza so that the site is kept clean and in a state of good repair. The specific maintenance services to be provided will be outlined in the agreement but may include daily sweeping and bagging of rubbish, watering of plants, removal of stickers and graffiti from street furniture and property, and shoveling snow from pathways. To become the formal partner for the plazas, DOT and the not-for-profit must apply to the Franchise and Concession Review Committee (FCRC) for authorization to enter into a "Master Concession Agreement". This agreement would give the not-for-profit partner the potential to generate revenue from concessions, limited sponsorship, and public special events. The revenue generated would then be used to manage, maintain and operate the plaza.
- **Insurance:** In addition to maintaining the site clean, safe, and in good repair, the not-for-profit partner will also be required to provide appropriate insurance on the plaza, as outlined in the Master Concession Agreement.
- **Outreach:** The partner will reach out to the public to gather relevant data and to provide active participation in the public workshops, which may include promotion, surveying, and coordination of participants during visioning workshops.
- **Design:** A team of professional designers contracted by DOT will be responsible for the design process. Not-for-profit partners will be expected to participate in regular design meetings with DOT and the professional designers so that the design is appropriate to the neighborhood context that it meets local needs, and that plazas are designed with acceptable materials and amenities.
- **Programming & Events:** To make the plazas vibrant centers of activity and neighborhood destinations, the not-for-profit partner will be responsible for programming activities and events at the site, which may include holiday events, food or craft markets, temporary public art installations or exhibits, and music and dancing. It would be expected that programmed activities take place at least four times per year.
- **Funding Plan:** Not-for-profit partners will develop a funding plan that outlines how the organization will fund and manage the plaza for the long term. To demonstrate that steps are being taken toward the funding plan, the not-for-profit partner will provide DOT progress reports.

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Albee Square, Brooklyn

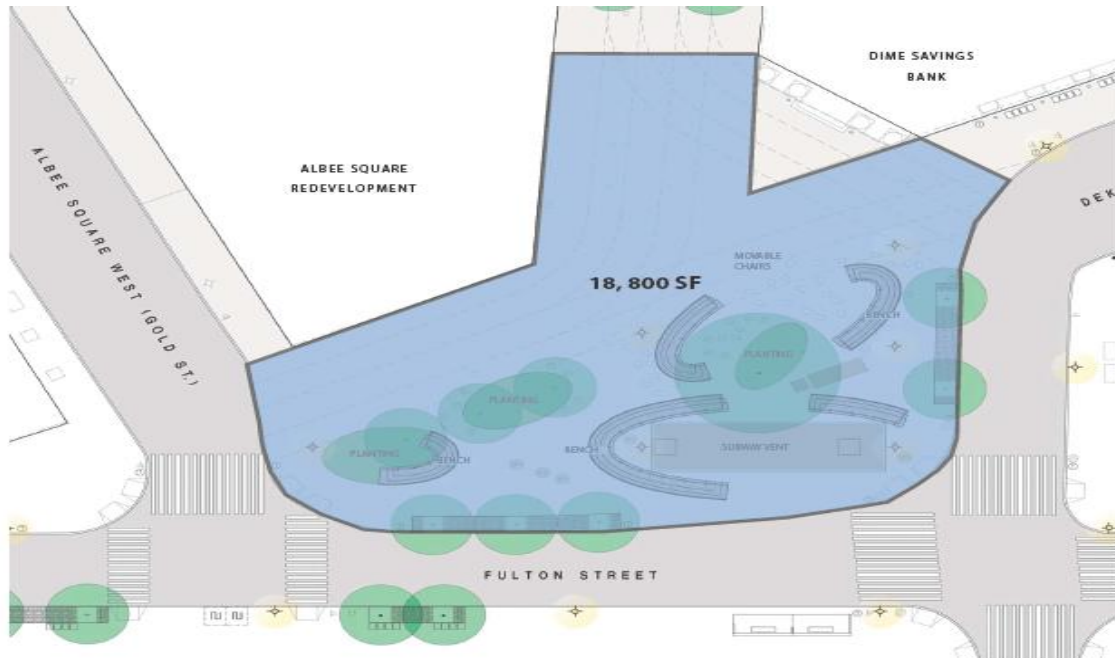
Before



After



New Site Plan



Albee Square Concession Agreement

■ Licensed Area





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COST

The program is funded with City capital funding at \$9 million USD per year for ten years from Fiscal Year 2009 to Fiscal Year 2019. Priority for plaza program awards is given to applicants whose projects have existing funding through grants or other sources such that City funds can be leveraged to create as many plazas as possible. The program does not have a large maintenance allocation, so it is intended that the not-for-profit local partners will take on the management and maintenance of the plazas. A public-private partnership agreement was created allowing the local partners to generate some revenue from the plazas to make their ongoing stewardship economically sustainable.

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

The success of this program will be measured by the ability to build plazas in as many community districts as possible using the set city fund and by leveraging other funding sources (grants, elected officials, private sector, etc).

Taking into account the size of a given plaza and the peak-time population of the surrounding area (the market of plaza users), the City will evaluate each plaza based on public life studies that analyze user activity. The surveys will allow the City to better understand how, when, and where people move about the plaza and provide indicators of the types of behaviors the plazas support.

Each plaza with a concession agreement will have an annual budget for maintenance and management agreed upon by DOT and its partners. Partners and their sub-concessionaires will be required to send to DOT quarterly statements of monthly revenues and expenses for the plazas, along with operational status reports. DOT will be able to use this data to see that the plazas are being sensibly managed and that revenues are consistent with expectations. DOT will also receive an annual plaza report and a third party audit of the plaza operation. Concessions are coming soon in Times Square, Chelsea, and Flatiron plazas.

Finally, DOT will periodically inspect each plaza to ensure that they are in a state of good repair and that its partners are fulfilling the obligations of their contract.

TIMELINE

2008	The NYC Plaza Program developed by the Agency's Division of Planning & Sustainability, Public Spaces Unit in collaboration with a taskforce made up of representatives from City Agencies and professionals in the non-profit sector. Round 1 of the Plaza Program launched, 8 plaza sites awarded funding
2009	Round 2 of the Plaza Program launched, 3 plaza sites awarded funding
2010	Round 3 of the Plaza Program launched, 3 plaza sites awarded funding
2011	Round 4 of the Plaza Program launched, 4 plaza sites awarded funding
2012	The fifth round of the Plaza program is currently open and accepting applications until July 13
2020	Goal reached of one new public space to be created in all 59 NYC community districts

LEGISLATION

With the intention of improving public spaces, Mayor Bloomberg signed legislation making all New York City parks, beaches and pedestrian plazas smoke-free effective May 23, 2011. The amended law will help reduce exposure to secondhand smoke and also reduce cigarette litter. The new law is expected to be enforced by New Yorkers; however, people who refuse to stop smoking could receive a ticket. Additional legislation is currently being drafted regarding criteria for sitting of newsstands at plazas.



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LESSONS LEARNED

Because this is an application-based program, the most difficult components are generating interest where there currently does not seem to be any and finding not-for-profit partners that are willing and able to grow into the role of public space manager. For the launch of the third round of the NYC Plaza Program, DOT has stepped up its outreach and promotional efforts to include a much broader audience of potential partners beyond the typical entities such as business improvement districts (BIDs), Local Development Corporations (LDCs) and neighborhoods groups. The latest strategy is to simplify the designs to speed review and implementation and lessen the maintenance burden. Also, once the construction of the first round of the Plaza Program is finally complete, the City hopes that it will build interest and confidence for prospective applicants.

DOT now contacts community health and housing organizations as they may also have a role in promoting the livability of the neighborhoods in which they operate. These organizations may also have the requisite capabilities in both maintaining facilities and doing the outreach necessary to deliver one of these projects.

TRANSFERABILITY

Four important elements make this best practice successful. First, it is application-based – the DOT is not selecting sites and imposing them on the community, but the communities themselves have determined the sites, which makes for a strong and supportive working relationship between the public and the city.

Second, because New York City was laid out as a system of grids with major streets intersecting the grids at awkward angles, there is much excess roadway at these diagonal intersections that is opportune for public space creation in neighborhoods across the five boroughs.

Third, to ensure the sustainability of a plaza, an option for partners is to build a partnership around a concessions agreement. While many plaza partners are BIDs, in some cases they are neighborhood groups who may not have the financial support necessary. The concessions partnership is an alternative funding source to support the maintenance and management of the plaza.

Lastly, many times new or redesigned plazas, including some that come from applicants to the program, are made possible by piggybacking on a planned infrastructure or streetscape improvement project. By applying Plaza Program money to an existing project in order to make public space improvements where street work is already happening, DOT is able to leverage its funding this way. This is one of the key innovations of the program.

CONTACTS

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Facts and figures in this report were provided by highlighted city agency to New York City Global Partners.