



Promising Practices for Schools Permitting Space

December 8th, 2014

The SPACE Coalition is a strategic outreach and action research body, composed of diverse community organizations and networks from across Ontario committed to improving access to public space. Through its work over the years, SPACE has paid attention toward effective practices school boards can engage to facilitate community use of schools and the permit process. The information below is a summary of what SPACE has documented thus far

Communication

Timeliness and responsiveness of communication are key. Information such as policy or procedure updates, reminder of deadlines, and notification of changes should be made readily available, accompanied by user support and feedback option.

Reminders and updates: the following is a list of situations in which timely communication is needed (this is not an exhaustive list)

- Reminder to renew permits
- Price changes (including those relating to adjustments to keep up with the Consumer Price Index)
- Information about new Ministry funded initiatives, such as the *Priority Schools Initiative*
- Timeline/deadline changes
- Follow up with community groups to find out why they cancelled permits to improve the service the board offers
- Any new administrative procedures
- Information sharing outlining relevant changes that will impact community use of schools, such as: "Understanding the Ontario Harmonized Sales Tax: Information for User Groups"
- Notifications when insurance certificate are 30 days from expiry

- Instruction and support around any migration of application or procedures from a previous paper form to electronic/internet-mediated form.
- Cancellation of dates, including inclement weather.
- Holiday closures and reopening dates

Responsive and transparent communication process: Permit offices should develop a system of in-person and online customer service that is responsive to user requests and allow for greater transparency in the application procedure.

- Contact information should be readily available for users who have questions requiring further clarification.
- auto-reply for permit requests, for system updates, etc. so applicants would know their request has been received and have a reasonable understanding of the timeline

Access to relevant and important information: Below is a list of items that should be regularly communicated and made accessible to users.

- A copy of the application (or web-link for renewals site)
- Clearly stated deadlines
- Clearly outlined dates that may be permitted
- Reference to the *Community Use of Schools* grant from the Ministry of Education and highlighting the purposes of such funds
- Information on insurance options for users who do not have sufficient coverage in place
- Instructions about what materials users must submit in order to maintain their organization's classification in most cost-appropriate category, i.e. not-for-profit certificate, letters patent, etc.
- Clear language *Use of Facilities Policies* shared (send a copy or web-link for policies)
- Clear language regulation compliance information shared (send a copy or web-link for regulations)
- Emergency contact numbers included with the permit

Multiple Method of Communication and redundancy of information: Permit offices should use multiple methods to communicate with users and repeat important information, announcements and reminders in multiple formats in order to ensure maximum reach.

- Email updates for critical deadlines or developments
- Regularly published newsletters containing important information to permit holders/applicants: including permit guidelines, fee schedule, contact information, Ministry initiatives, programming information

Web Information access and navigation

Important information regarding facility and contact should be made available on website; automated electronic booking system should be set up to make the application process more efficient and accessible.

- Co-terminus board information should be linked from the Community Use of Schools' home page
- Information posted online about space specific attributes, such as gym facility square footage, type of floor, times available and times when space is never available, etc.
- Include photos of facilities linked within the description section
- Automated online booking system, along with user support

Permit Application, categorization and pricing

Give consideration to time allotment, continuation of permits and notification of cancellation.

- Permits should be able to start and end at :15 and :45 hours, not just on the hour and on the half hour
- Existing permits should be able to be 'rolled over'
- Schools provide as much notice as possible when cancelling a community permit

Permit categories

- Permit categories should be clearly differentiated with ample descriptive information and examples to guide permit applicants.

Permit pricing

- Do not charge permit application fees
- Have an option of permitting by the hour
- Fully subsidized categories for marginalized groups

Ways of valuing Community Use of Space

- School boards and municipalities should make every effort to recognize the value of community use of public space, by making it a priority and by putting policies in place to support this commitment
- School boards should establish *Community Use of Schools Advisory Committees* to help guide program development and decision making including: community use of school facilities program principles, categorization and rates for user groups, process of renting school facilities
- Involve the broader community in visioning and strategic direction planning exercises to discuss equitable access for programming space; use stakeholder surveys to reach the widest possible audience
- Work with organizations that advocate for community space and promote public policy solutions
- School boards and Ministry of Education should make available statistics and reports about community use, i.e. who is using the facilities, when, and highlight program success and areas of learning.
- Implement Community Use of Schools Temporary Schedule Extensions: during periods of labour unrest, many extra-curricular activities in schools are cancelled – schools boards should offer extended hours of operation for community use of schools after operation resumes