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Four ways to promote Philadelphia's nightlife as a possible antidote to nuisance and violence

When it comes to partaking in Philadelphia's nightlife, the fear that many people feel is very real.

Nighttime is when so much creative culture happens, and - particularly in the wake of the shootout on South Street in June - we need to draw on a wider range of solutions to create safe experiences in nightlife corridors without damaging their vibrancy.

As members of the nightlife committee of Philadelphia City Council's Arts and Culture Task Force, we have been charged with advising Council members on the concerns of Philadelphia's artists.

Our research - drawn from an examination of nightlife policy in communities around the world, and our lived experiences as entrepreneurs, patrons, artists, and managers - has identified ways to promote better nightlife as the antidote to nuisance and violence.

We must not repeat the mistakes of others. The authorities in Sydney responded to violent incidents in 2014 with curfews that led to major reductions in downtown activity. They later repealed the laws and invested in planning, design, and engagement. City officials in Austin, Texas, learned from this, and their Council responded to a 2021 shooting on Sixth Street with recommendations for decongesting roadways and improving lighting, programming, and retail mix.

Here are four ideas for governments, communities, and establishments that have shown promise:

Establish nighttime governance and develop a plan

There is no municipal plan for the development and support of Philadelphia's nighttime industries. The response to the South Street incident has been ad hoc crisis management. The city should proactively engage businesses, artists, patrons, and neighbors to create a strategic vision for the nighttime city that prioritizes creative and profitable nightlife, the dignity of workers, livable communities, and safety. London and Sydney have created plans Philadelphia can emulate.

The Commerce Department is hiring a nighttime economy director at our recommendation. This type of office, which exists in many major cities, will engage community members and stakeholders while managing conflicts. This directorship establishes a governance framework to create and implement a plan. It also creates a point person to manage crises like South Street with care.

Four ways to promote Philadelphia's nightlife as a possible antidote to nuisance and violence.

Use design and programming to improve safety

Design and lighting can create fluid pedestrian traffic and safer conditions in corridors. For example, Orlando, Fla., uses ride-share stations and other transportation access points to ease congestion. Amsterdam uses staggered, later closing times to decrease binge-drinking and decongest the Rembrandtplein district. Mexico's Urban Secretariat has nighttime design guidelines to address the safety needs of vulnerable groups.

Programming promotes good conduct. Patrons are less likely to act in an antisocial way if they are invested in music, food, ambiance, and community. Extending programming into the public realm with commerce or performances can influence the feel and safety of the street. We recommended to Council that licensing, zoning, and tax reforms would increase the money establishments can invest in programming, and incentivize the creation of more venues, including those that can offer programming and space for teenagers.

Invest in harm reduction

We recommend that the city subsidize harm reduction training for nightlife establishments. This will allow businesses to improve safety outcomes, improve perceptions of safety, and reduce the nuisance and stigmatization often associated with nighttime activities. Many training and accreditation schemes exist. Philadelphia is home to the Safe Bars training through Women Organized Against Rape, the Philadelphia Center for Sexual Violence. There is also nightlife-specific harm reduction training available for public safety officers in the U.S. Accreditation programs in Bogotá, Colombia, and Dallas give the public information about compliance and incentivize participation.

Signal good behavior

Messaging can promote norms of behavior for public spaces. Local businesses, business associations, and city agencies can establish messaging campaigns including street ambassadors and art designed by local artists. Paris has a street team to carry out messaging and mediation to prevent sound pollution. The "Pierrots de la Nuit" raise awareness among night owls through artistic interventions and conversation. Amsterdam uses "plaza hosts" to direct tourists, assist people to medical help, and keep eyes on the street. According to former Amsterdam "Night Mayor" Mirik Milan, plaza hosts, staggered closing times, and decongestion in the Rembrandtplein area were related to a 20% reduction in alcohol-related incidents and a 40% decrease in nuisance reports.

Violence is often the result of our societal fabrics being torn apart by inequities experienced in our communities. The scope of this problem is beyond anybody's ability to solve alone, including the government. We call on Philadelphians to come together and embrace the possibilities of our city being safer and more creative than ever before. A focus on these new solutions will keep residents and patrons safe. It will keep artists, restaurants, and venues in business, and it will chart a positive course for Philadelphia's future.

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