



Creating a Nightlife Plan for your City

Nighttime Economy
Culture and Policy
(NITECAP) Alliance



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Introduction

Most of us are familiar with the adage, “Nothing good happens after midnight.” Traditionally, cities have focused on providing services through a daytime lens because the only activity perceived as happening at night were revelry and mayhem, which traditionally have fallen squarely in the jurisdiction of law enforcement. As such, local governance at night has typically been limited to reacting to problems and complaints and shutting down bad behavior. “The urban night has traditionally been a regimented space characterized by strict policing and surveillance.” ([Seijas and Milan, 2020](#)). This view has shifted in recent years, as cities develop in the dawn of a 24-hour world. Elliott Phear with Forbes Agency Council reported in a 2019 [article](#) that approximately 80% of Americans live in metro areas, where a more vibrant nightlife plays a significant role in the overall local economy. In addition, the creative, social, and cultural activities of a community are prevalent at night. These activities are what make cities special and unique and, as such, should be prioritized as communities plan for their future.

With a growing emphasis on what happens after the sun sets, cities are realizing that reactive management is not an effective way to deal with problems or seize opportunities that may emerge at night. Not only do cities need better ways to address the nuisances at night, but they must also learn to leverage all the night has to offer if they are to survive and thrive in the global marketplace. Effective nighttime planning, tailored to local challenges and opportunities is key.

Background

The NITECAP Alliance is a network of professionals responsible for nighttime economy advocacy, planning, and management in US cities. NITECAP’s mission is to share experiences, policies, and practices; raise awareness about nighttime economy and culture across disciplines; and highlight the value and importance of this role within city government. The concept of the “nighttime economy” originated through the work of the Responsible Hospitality Institute (RHI) and the nascent forms of “night management’ roles they piloted in San Diego (1996), then seeded in Chicago, Athens, Monterey, Tallahassee, D.C., and Philadelphia. Simultaneous to more formalized municipal roles developing in San Francisco (2013) and Pittsburgh (2014), the movement gained momentum when Amsterdam hired the first “Night Mayor”, a leader chosen by club and bar owners and other members of the nightlife ecosystem in 2014. The idea spread to other urban cities in Europe and now exists in many cities in the United States and around the world. The goals for each city are as diverse as the cities

themselves, but the essential idea is the same -- to protect the quality of life for residents while recognizing the 24-hour nature of the world and nurturing the vibrancy that life at night offers to both residents and visitors.

Objective

The objective of this report is to provide guidance to local government managers in making decisions that allow the nighttime to add to, rather than detract from, the value of their destination. NITECAP would like to help cities ask the right questions and identify the right resources as they plan for life at night in their city or region. Not every jurisdiction will have the same solution to a problem or the same strategy to accomplish a goal. Every city's available resources and political dynamic will also vary, requiring a customized approach.

We have created a systematic three-step guiding document that includes a list of questions and topics that might be helpful when you articulate your goals and begin to develop a plan.

Step One: Assess your Community's Life at Night

Local government leaders are encouraged to examine the current conditions and environment in the community as they relate to the jurisdiction's life at night. Conducting an analysis that defines the opportunities, issues, existing resources, and support will help determine the best way to address the concerns and possibilities of the nightlife industry, residents, elected officials, and other community stakeholders.

Define Nightlife

Before you can analyze your nightlife, you need to define what nightlife is. A city's nightlife encompasses many elements, and it is as varied as the daytime life. The obvious reference for "nightlife" is the bars, nightclubs, and live music venues. But while the entertainment and spaces for socialization are significant parts of a city's nightlife, they are only one component of it. Life at night also includes amenities and services that are not entertainment-related, such as hospitals, schools, manufacturing plants, call centers, etc. All these businesses, entertainment related and otherwise, provide services to the customers and employment opportunities. Both the customers and the workforce contribute to the existence of a well-developed nightlife. As such, it is imperative that both have access to a variety of services, such as safe transportation, parking, and affordable, dependable childcare.

Understanding what the complete nightlife concept entails will assist you in defining what part or parts your city wants to engage in or manage.

Define Goals

Creating a new methodology to address your jurisdiction's nightlife requires properly defining what you want to accomplish. The following is a list of questions and topics to consider that will help articulate those goals and begin to develop a plan:

Have you identified a problem or issue related to the city's nightlife that requires resolution or focused attention?

Most nighttime initiatives in the country were created in response to a public and visible issue in the community. Perhaps, the number of noise complaints or violent crime at night is on the rise. Are nightlife venues in your community closing at a concerning rate? Are the night workers in your community struggling to find safe transportation?

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In Arlington, Virginia, there was an increase in alcohol-related crime in addition to quality-of-life concerns such as loud noise, trash, heavy traffic, and unruly crowds. In Pittsburgh, nightlife activity that had historically occurred in a primarily industrial-zoned neighborhood was moving to a residentially dense neighborhood. This shift resulted in quality-of-life impacts and safety concerns for the neighbors. There may not be a problem to be solved, per se, but rather a desire to encourage and nurture a life at night that enhances the quality of life and stimulates economic development. In San Francisco for example, the City established nighttime goals that focus on connecting local nightlife businesses to City resources, supporting legislative and policy developments to advance the sector, and advocate for the development and protection of nightlife spaces.

Define the circumstances that led to a desire to take formal action.

Identify the conditions and circumstances that sparked the call for action. Who is involved and who is impacted? The impetus in Arlington for a formal initiative was a drain of law enforcement resources. Too many officers were required to work the weekends to mitigate and address the issues-- it was unsustainable. The challenging

conditions caused the officers not to want to work the Police detail that provided special coverage of law enforcement and security services.

In Seattle, Washington, the nightlife community, particularly the nightclubs and live music venues, were organizing in protest to a Teen Dance Ordinance, which prohibited youth under 21 from congregating to dance. The ordinance severely impacted the entertainment venues' ability to hold events for underaged patrons. The ordinance was adopted in 1985 but was eventually repealed in 2002. This repeal launched continued advocacy and the eventual adoption of The Seattle Nightlife Initiative, an 8-Point plan for improving nightlife safety and reducing conflicts between venues and residents in the urban neighborhoods ([Gutierrez, 2010](#)).

Successful initiatives must include programs focused on finding the right balance between safety and vibrancy at night. Cities that have launched effective initiatives report a range of different approaches, from increased or designated staffing, formation of a special task forces, development of specialized strategies, and the creation of full-time nighttime teams that actively work on the identified matters.

Once the issue has been defined and the relevant players and stakeholders identified, the next step is to address the issue in partnership with the interested parties.

Step Two: Identify Support to Advance the Goals

Once the goal is established, garnering support, financial, political, and otherwise, is critical for a successful and sustainable implementation. Take time to identify and describe the support that exists in your government organization and community and the support you need to accomplish the specific goal or goals.

Describe and quantify the support from elected officials and City leadership for a nighttime-focused plan.

Did the elected body or chief administrative officer (i.e., city manager, strong mayor, executive director) call for action? Are they willing to support the action financially? While local government support is not critical as an initiative is developed, support is vital for its successful implementation. If you do not yet have support from the whole elected body through a resolution, ordinance, or other approval method, seek "champions" who serve on the elected body and can provide the leverage and political support to carry a plan forward. Gaining support for a nightlife program, as with any new program, is a process. You might have to first gain support from influential

stakeholders in the community who will raise the awareness with the elected officials. Depending on the issues identified in the first part of the analysis, finding the right champions to advocate for a solution is key.

To address the issues in Arlington County, the Police Department created the Arlington Restaurant Initiative accreditation program, which is modeled on the United Kingdom’s Best Bar None accreditation initiative. The Police Department partners “with other County agencies to raise the standards of restaurants that serve alcohol, streamline processes within the County Government and maintain Arlington County as a safe

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destination for nightlife and entertainment,” (Arlington County [Website](#), 2022). Venues that voluntarily achieve accreditation through the program, which provides “effective practices to increase safety, including responsible alcohol

service, public safety expectations, fire code/safety, food safety, and zoning compliance,” are recognized and used as examples for best practices in the community. (Arlington County [Website](#), 2022). “Once the County agencies understood our ‘education before enforcement’ approach, reports Samantha Brien, Arlington County Police Department Restaurant and Nightlife Liaison, “they were on board.” Earning support from venues was more challenging as they saw the initiative as more punitive than supportive. Brien explains, “Once they experienced the benefits of a safer environment, they have been supportive and taken ownership over the community.”

The City of Austin used a task force to advance their nightlife initiative. In 2008 they created a Live Music Task Force to provide more support for the live music industry. “Essentially, the industry and music community asked the City to create programs and regulatory systems that provided funding and other kinds of support they believe were needed to live up to the moniker, Live Music Capital of the World,” explains Brian Block, the City’s Entertainment Services Manager.

Describe and quantify the support from community stakeholders for a nighttime-focused initiative.

As noted earlier, the city organization may not always fully prioritize the nighttime initiatives initially, making it even more important to build partnerships in the community. Is there a hospitality alliance or organized group of business owners that

supports a plan of action? What about neighborhood support in areas with significant concentrations of nighttime businesses?

Identify all the groups, associations, and organizations in the community with interest that support the initiative. Support from elected officials and other leaders is important and critical for sustained implementation, but if they leave office, other community, and organizational support provides the necessary foundation and bridge to newly elected officials.

In Seattle, for example, the designated nighttime advocate was created by the mayor. Subsequent leadership did not prioritize the position, thus jeopardizing the role. Fortunately, the strong support from the nightlife community helped ensure the position remained. Similarly, the Fort Lauderdale City Commission funded a nighttime division with a manager and staff. Shortly after the division was fully staffed the majority of the City Commission changed. In addition, a new city manager was hired, and the priorities shifted. Support from the business community that recognized the benefits of having nighttime liaisons among City staff contributed to successfully raise the awareness of the importance of the initiative; the city continues to fund the nighttime manager position.

Step Three: Explore Different Nighttime Management Options

Now that the problem or issue has been defined and framed, and support identified, the next step is to develop a roadmap or a plan of action for your jurisdiction.

Do the desires of the policy makers warrant a new position or role within the City to address the problems or issues? Or perhaps shifting existing resources temporarily or long-term will be effective? As noted earlier, several cities in the United States have created designated nighttime management positions. While it may seem that creating such a role is ideal, it is important to define the scope of the position, and ensure that that role has clear direction, political support, and sufficient budget and staff to accomplish the desired outcome.

An important distinction when formulating the nighttime management structure is to identify whether the City and the community are interested in abating nuisances or if the interest lies in new approaches to increase the provision of City services at night. The former can most likely be addressed by shifting resources. The latter requires focused ongoing strategic planning and additional staff to accomplish it to be successful.

If strategic planning for the future is the goal, then the City or jurisdiction will benefit from determining what that looks like. In 2012, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors commissioned an economic impact study documenting the nightlife sector's \$4.2 billion impact and 48,000 employees, as well as nightlife businesses' spending in other local industries and nightlife's role in attracting tourism. By defining the nightlife industry and its economic significance in a clear way, this study helped nightlife advocates articulate the value of preserving and growing this industry, paving the way for the City's Office of Economic and Workforce Development to create a business development role focused on nightlife in 2013.

In Austin, two themes emerged from the Live Music Task Force's work. One focused on economic development, and the other on nightlife management and regulatory issues, specifically:

- Create and provide economic development programs for artists and live music venues through a new music office
- Create a more robust system for sound management and dedicate staff to it that can manage the system with a fair and balanced approach
- Serve as a liaison to music venues to assist navigating the City's permitting and enforcement protocols and by developing policies that streamline such processes

In Iowa City, community support developed and funds the designated nighttime manager. This role does not work in the City government, but rather within the framework of a business improvement district, namely a Self-Supported Municipal Improvement District (SSMID). This position, unlike a city employee, represents and speaks on behalf of the business community, while enjoying a collaborative working relationship with the City that has developed over time through the District. In New York City, the Director for the Office of Nightlife, which was positioned in the Mayor's Office by legislation, had the support of the hospitality industry and residents, as well as the City Council and Mayor. Mayor Bill de Blasio formed the Office of Nightlife "to promote the industry and soothe strained relations between the city's night spots and neighborhoods that complain about their merriment..." ([Feuer, 2018](#)). This mayoral office oversees a 12-person advisory board and consists of a staff of five.

Building Support

Whether the initial goal is to abate nuisances or advocate for a vibrant and active nightlife, the ultimate goal is to accomplish better strategic planning for our cities after dark.

As with any new initiative or project, measurable wins and a consistent drive forward are key to a successful effort and continued support. Accomplishing the goal for the initial problem or issue that has been identified is a great start. Build on that success by continuing to identify opportunities for improvement, assessing the necessary resources to get it done, and advocating for financial, political, and community support. Remember that the process of developing and implementing a nighttime plan is a marathon and not a sprint. While some may resist or oppose your effort to accomplish the goals, those same opponents become advocates once they see the benefits that your success delivers to them.

Data collection is another important method for gaining support. Several cities have conducted fiscal or economic impact studies to assess the value of their nighttime by looking at sales transactions, employment numbers, tax and other revenue, traffic patterns, etc. These studies serve a couple of purposes:

- They educate the community about what their life after dark is worth in quantifiable metrics
- They establish a baseline upon which to measure improvement

Data also justifies allocating funding for additional resources. In Fort Lauderdale, the increase of noise complaints is being used to request additional Code Compliance Officers for the nighttime hours in the next budget year. Currently, existing officers

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cover nighttime hours with overtime. While adding new positions will increase the budget, the impact is mitigated by the reduction of overtime pay. The improved service and consequential improvement to the quality of life justify the increase.

In Pittsburgh, Nighttime Economy Manager Allison Harnden has been advocating for a data analyst in her office. “To better make a case for shifting more City services to nights and weekends and to track and anticipate changes to life at night, I have advocated for a data analyst,” Harnden explains. “The request has been denied twice, but it’s important so we will continue to build our case and make the request.”

Determine Nighttime Initiative's Placement in the Organization

The department or office where the responsibility for the nighttime initiative is situated also affects the success of the effort. Some initiatives lie with enforcement agencies such as Police or Code, while others are housed within administration, such as the city manager's or mayor's office.

The ideal location is the office where the initiative will receive the most support and resources. While the best location in one city may be in the chief administrator's office, the better choice in another city may be within public safety. Consider the needs of the organization and community when determining the place in the organization. Where are you most likely able to accomplish the goals? Often, the choice may revolve around specific individuals rather than departments. "Champions" within your organization may exist in unexpected locations.

In New York City, the nightlife office is in the mayor's office. In Fort Lauderdale, it is in the city manager's office. In San Francisco and Seattle, the positions are part of the economic development office. In Austin, the office is in the Development Services Department and in Iowa City and Orlando, the roles serve in downtown districts outside the city government. In places where there is no designated nightlife office, the initiative or designation may exist in law enforcement or public safety, as is the case in Arlington and Pittsburgh, or in Code Enforcement as in Toronto, Canada. The case for nighttime planning can be made for any office that is coordinating a response to nighttime issues.

What is required is an environment of collaboration, a recognition that the community's nighttime is as relevant as their daytime, and a desire to improve service provision for residents and guests so they may enjoy a safe and vibrant life at night.

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