

# Play Streets in Suburban Neighborhoods

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## ABSTRACT

Douglas County is experiencing neighborhood design and social trends that include popularity of street sports, increased parental concerns for child safety, and suburban development with over 1,150 cul-de-sac streets. Residents on one cul-de-sac requested a Play Street designation so their children could legally play in the street. Prior to the request, the Sheriff had made over 60 visits responding to illegal street play, with a number of citations issued. The allowance for local authorities to designate a Play Street is provided in Colorado Revised Statute 42-4-109(9) which states that: *No person shall use the highways for traveling on skis, sleds, skates... toy vehicle, or similar device to go upon any roadway except while crossing a highway in a crosswalk... **This subsection (9) does not apply to any public way which is set aside by proper authority as a play street and which is adequately roped off or otherwise marked for such purpose.*** A variety of Play Street laws and ordinances were found through research. Examples were only found in dense urban locations. Douglas County worked with the Colorado/Wyoming Section of ITE to create a Play Street Technical and Legislative sub-committee to consider Play Street issues and develop uniform traffic control applications. The initial recommendation of the committee was for removal of the Play Street allowance from the Statutes. Absent a political champion of that effort, the committee worked to develop a Play Street definition, uniform criteria for designating, delineating, and implementing Play Streets and additional considerations.

## INTRODUCTION

While primarily rural in land mass, Douglas County, Colorado was the fastest growing county in the nation over the last census decade. The County is south of and adjacent to the Denver metropolitan area and is 844 square miles in size over mountains, foothills, and plains. About half of the County's approximate 60,000 population reside in the 30 square mile northern suburban development area, which is part of the greater Denver metro area.

Residents on a neighborhood cul-de-sac in suburban Douglas County have requested that their street be designated as a Play Street so that their children can legally play in the roadway in front of their homes.

Douglas County and many other suburban communities are experiencing neighborhood social trends that include the popularity of street sports and increased parental concerns for child safety – parents want their children to play near home. At the same time, new suburban residential development incorporates neighborhood design with decreasing yard size, discontinuous/curvilinear streets, and numerous cul-de-sacs. Over 1,150 cul-de-sac streets now exist in unincorporated Douglas County.

Street play on cul-de-sac streets seldom results in any serious vehicular-pedestrian conflicts due to low traffic volume and low speed. Typically, a vehicle approaches and children move out of the way, the vehicle passes and the children resume playing. However, on one cul-de-sac street in Douglas County, the County Sheriff has made over 60 visits and issued several citations resulting from citizen complaints regarding children playing within the cul-de-sac. The Play Street issue

became the topic of radio talk show programs for several months last summer and monopolized the time of County Public Works staff and elected officials. Douglas County subsequently initiated this study of Play Street applications specific to suburban situations.

## **BACKGROUND**

There has been a long standing agreement among transportation engineers and law enforcement officials discouraging playing in streets due to pedestrian safety concerns. In areas where children play in streets, “Children at Play” and “Slow – Children” signs have sometimes been installed. However, these are non-standard signs and are not compliant with the Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD).

- *“Uniformity of the physical characteristics of signs (size, shape, color) is especially critical near school areas and care should be exercised to assure conformance to the standards outlined in the MUTCD. Non-uniform signs such as “CAUTION-CHILDREN AT PLAY,” “SLOW-CHILDREN,” or similar legends should not be permitted on any roadway at any time. While these signs may serve to alert drivers, they could be interpreted by others to infer that children are permitted to play in roadways. On the contrary, every means should be used to point out that children should not play on or near any road, street or alley, no matter how remote or “safe” the roadway appears. Consequently, the removal of any nonstandard signs should carry a high priority.” (1983 Traffic Control Devices Handbook - Federal Highway Administration)*
- *These types of signs “may imply that the involved jurisdiction approves streets as playground, which may result in the jurisdiction being vulnerable to tort liability.” (2001 Traffic Control Devices Handbook - Institute of Transportation Engineers)*
- *“Children at Play signs may make parents feel more secure but they don’t work and they carry no enforcement value.” (ITE Journal - May 1988)*

The allowance for local authorities to designate streets as Play Streets is provided in the Colorado Revised Statutes, and similarly in many other State Statutes and City Ordinances.

Colorado Revised Statute 42-4-109(9) states that: *No person shall use the highways for traveling on skis, toboggans, coasting sleds, skates... toy vehicle, or similar device to go upon any roadway except while crossing a highway in a crosswalk... **This subsection (9) does not apply to any public way which is set aside by proper authority as a play street and which is adequately roped off or otherwise marked for such purpose.*** The State Statutes focus on legal vehicular operations and pedestrian activities along state highways and arterial streets, not local residential streets, and provide no further definition or description of Play Streets, nor any guidance for their designation or implementation.

## **EXAMPLE PLAY STREETS AND LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS**

A variety of example Play Street laws and ordinances were found through research on Play Street applications throughout the United States. Examples were found in urban locations but no examples were found in suburban applications. Two urban Play Street applications are described below:



## New York City

The New York Play Streets practice dates to 1949. It was initiated for schools lacking adequate yard or auditorium space. Street closings usually occur on small side streets.

New York City's policy for issuing a non-school related play street includes:

- A petition endorsed by at least 50% of residents, community board, local police precinct
- No playgrounds or park facilities exist within a five-block radius of the location
- The street is not a main or two-way artery with high vehicular volume
- The street is not designated as a fire, bus, or truck route
- Physical features and topography do not create hazards

New York City's investigation procedure includes the following steps:

- Prepare a base map of the area within a five-block radius of the street
- Locate existing playgrounds and play streets within the area
- Prepare a field survey for the street, recording the following:
  - 20 minute count of vehicles traveling on proposed play street
  - 1 hour count of children playing on street
- Curb study of both sides of the street

New York uses devices to block off play streets from traffic, including barricades, and signs that specify hours for play.



## **Philadelphia**

Over 500 of Philadelphia's urban streets were designated Play Streets in summer months in 2003. Philadelphia requires 75% of adjacent residents' approval and parental supervision during play hours. Streets are closed between 10:00 AM and 4:00 PM. Applications are filed with the Department of Recreation, and the Department provides play equipment, supplies and food in connection with Child Nutrition Services.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF A PLAY STREET PROGRAM**

As with any traffic control strategy, transportation engineers strive to develop and implement uniform treatments. To standardize the application of the Play Street concept, Douglas County joined with the Colorado/Wyoming Chapter of the Institute of Traffic Engineers (ITE) to form a Play Street Technical and Legislative sub-committee. Transportation professionals from eight Denver metro area communities worked to develop a Play Street definition, uniform criteria for designating, delineating, and implementing Play Streets and additional considerations that local communities could use in establishing related policies and ordinances.

## **MODEL GUIDELINES FOR PLAY STREET DESIGNATION AND DELINEATION**

This action and the following guidelines should not be interpreted as advocating the implementation of Play Streets by either the Technical Committee or by the Colorado/Wyoming Section of ITE. In fact, the initial recommendation was for removal of the allowance for Play Streets from the State Statutes. Absent a political champion of that effort, these model guidelines have been prepared to address the current Colorado Revised Statutes which allow the designation of Play Streets by local jurisdictions.

The Technical Committee agreed that there were many administrative, procedural, regulatory, and enforcement issues associated with Play Street implementation that would need to be addressed by individual communities or jurisdictions. However, the Technical Committee also agreed that if Play Streets are to be implemented, then a uniform approach to their designation and delineation, regardless of local jurisdiction, is desirable. This approach is consistent with the transportation engineering industry's goal of uniform application of traffic control devices, to increase the public's recognition, understanding, and consistent compliance.

For purposes of these guidelines, a Play Street is defined as follows:

*A Play Street is a portion of a residential roadway, meeting specific physical criteria for such designation, and that is designated through consistent signing and pavement marking, where children may play in the roadway but yield right of way when motor vehicle traffic is present, and where motor vehicle operators should have a heightened level of awareness of and alertness for pedestrians in the roadway.*

Physical Criteria and Delineation Guidelines for Play Street Designation were developed with committee input and review. A standard for implementation was identified along with supplemental guidance and supporting recommendations.

## **Roadway Type and Character**

### Standard

- Application of Play Streets shall be considered only on “local access” residential roadways (not arterials or collectors).
- 100% of the land area fronting a Play Street shall be residential in character or zoning.
- A roadway segment designated as a Play Street shall have predominantly (80% or more) “front yard” residential frontage.

### Guidance and Support

- In suburban areas, cul-de-sacs or loop streets with no through traffic are most appropriate.
- In urban areas with a grid street pattern, segments with minimal through traffic may also be appropriate.
- Play Streets should typically have an estimated average daily traffic volume (ADT) of 300 vehicles per day or less.
- Roadway segments fronting parks, schools, or commercial uses should not be designated as Play Streets, as they will have a higher likelihood of non-local traffic.
- Roadways with “side yard” or “back yard” residential frontage typically have higher travel speeds and serve non-local traffic and should not be designated as Play Streets.

## **Play Street Dimensions**

### Standard

- Play Streets shall not be designated within 150 feet of a roadway intersection or within 100 feet of the end of a median.
- No more than one Play Street segment shall be implemented in any single roadway block (or logical block segment on extremely long blocks).

### Guidance and Support

- A portion of a roadway designated as a Play Street should have a minimum length of 100 feet and a maximum length of 300 feet.
- Play area length limits should discourage individual households from requesting Play Street designation and should provide motorists with a distinct and finite roadway length where heightened attention and awareness is warranted.
- For a Play Street to be considered, it should front on at least two adjacent residential lots.

## **Speed Limit**

### Standard

- Blocks or roadway segments that contain a Play Street shall have a posted speed limit. The appropriate posted speed limit shall be determined by the local jurisdiction’s traffic engineer. The posted speed limit in a Play Street shall not exceed 30 miles per hour.

### Guidance and Support

- A 20 miles per hour speed limit is recommended for Play Streets. The 20 miles per hour speed limit is consistent with typical school zone speed limits. However, it is recognized that local regulations and speed limit posting practice may result in a posted speed limit that is different than 20 miles per hour.

- Care should be taken that Play Streets are not implemented simply as a means to respond to neighborhood requests to lower residential street speed limits.

## **Sight Distance**

### Standard

- A Play Street shall be configured such that an approaching motorist in each direction can see the full length of the roadway surface in the Play Street area from a point 100 feet prior to reaching the beginning of the Play Street zone.
- When a Play Street is located at the end of a cul-de-sac, motorists exiting a driveway onto the play area must be able to see the full length of the Play Street area.

## **Signing**

### Standard

- Play Street limits shall be clearly designated using regulatory and/or warning signs.
- The appropriate speed limit shall be posted at the beginning of the Play Street area.

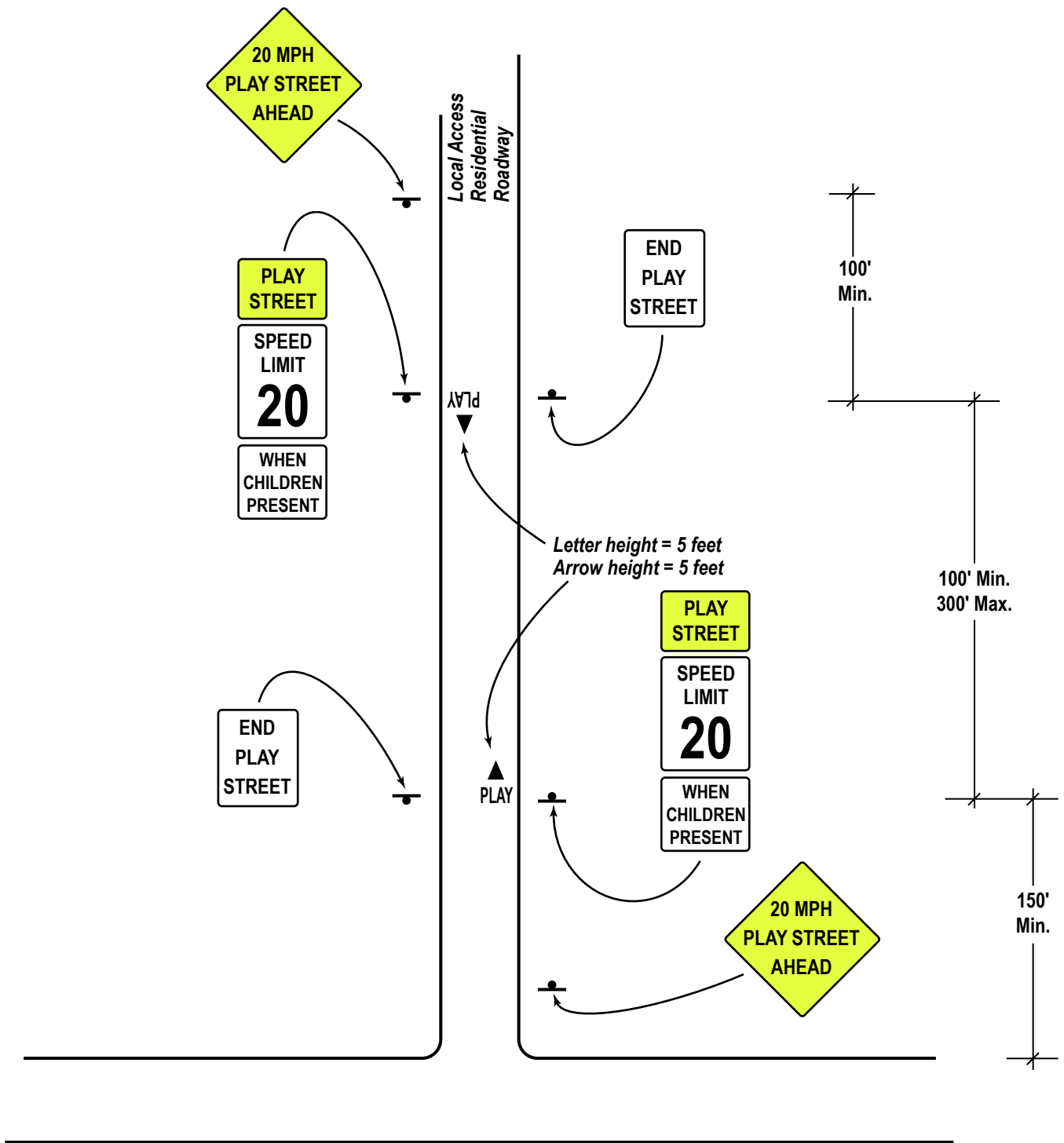
### Guidance and Support

- Play Streets delineation recommendations are similar in nature to School Zone signs and pavement markings.
- Play Streets should be delineated with the following traffic signs (see **Figure 1**):
  - Play Street Advanced Warning Sign – diamond shaped -black on a fluorescent yellow-green background – “20 MPH PLAY STREET AHEAD” – posted at the beginning of the block or at least 100 feet prior to beginning of the defined play area.
  - Play Street speed limit assembly posted at the beginning of the play area – “PLAY STREET” placard – black on fluorescent yellow-green, above a “SPEED LIMIT 20” sign – black on white, above a “WHEN CHILDREN PRESENT” placard (or other time of day application) – black on white
  - “END PLAY STREET” sign – black on white – posted at the end of the play area
- Where a Play Street is designated in the bulb of a cul-de-sac, only the “inbound” direction is signed, except that the “END PLAY STREET” sign is posted in the “outbound” direction also.
- Yellow signs may be used instead of the fluorescent yellow-green signs as determined by the local jurisdiction Traffic Engineer.

## **Pavement Markings**

### Guidance and Support

- A Play Street should be designated with pavement markings as shown in **Figure 1**. White word message “PLAY ” (with 5’ tall letters) followed by a solid white triangle pointing toward the play area – posted in the middle of the approach traffic lane at the beginning of the defined play area. (This pavement marking is similar to the use of the word “SCHOOL” on the pavement at school zones.)
- Where a Play Street is designate in the bulb of a cul-de-sac, only one “inbound” marking is necessary.



**Figure 1**  
**Example Signage and Marking**  
**for Play Streets**

## **Other Considerations**

### Standard

- The use of physical barriers, such as cones or moveable barricades, are not typically recommended and shall only be considered in special cases.
- Time of day application shall be determined by the local jurisdiction Traffic Engineer.

### Guidance and Support

- The application of physical barriers should be reviewed on a case-by case basis by the local jurisdiction Traffic Engineer.

## **PLAY STREET IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS**

In the process of developing the model guidelines, it was apparent that a number of other issues related to Play Street implementation need to be addressed by communities before installing a Play Street. This summary of Play Street implementation considerations lists and describes issues to give communities or jurisdictions the benefit of the groundwork done by this ITE Committee.

### **Determining Local Public Interest and Support for Play Street Application**

- How are resident requests handled?
  - An informational flier of Play Streets guidelines and standards should be developed and handed out to residents as a first step.
  - Jurisdictions should define an application process so that all requests are handled consistently. This includes identifying the department and staff member responsible for fielding requests.
  - When a request is received, a map should be prepared that highlights all parks, schools, open spaces and pathways in the vicinity, to help make sure that a Play Street designation is really needed or wanted in this location.
- What is the zone of impact for a requested Play Street?
  - The physical limits of the Play Street have been recommended in the Model Guidelines, but the extent of the residences that are influenced (and therefore should be involved in the approval process) should to be defined. Examples: all residents on the block or all residents within the Play Street area and within 100 feet of each end.
- How is local support for Play Streets measured, and what level of support is required for approval?
  - A polling procedure may need to be developed to determine if there is enough support for a Play Street within the zone of impact. This procedure needs to define who takes the poll (neighbors themselves or staff member) and what level of support is needed within the area (simple majority, super majority, etc.) These procedures and thresholds need to be clearly defined before any polling is done.
- Is there any formal public input process, such as neighborhood meetings?
  - It may be appropriate to have one or more meetings with area residents to make sure that everyone understands what a Play Street is and what it will mean on their street. The jurisdictional staffing implication of these meetings should be addressed.

- Who has the final say? What if there are disputes?
  - If this is a staff level approval, there are circumstances that might elevate the decision to a higher board or council. It should be predetermined who will have the authority to settle disputes at this level of the process.

### **Defining Times When a Play Street Is In Effect**

- The times of day for Play Street use should be defined and posted clearly. Time period choices may include:
  - When children are present
  - Specific hours of the day
  - Dawn till dusk
- Each choice of time period has implementation issues and concerns that should be addressed.

### **Defining Acceptable and Unacceptable Uses of a Play Street**

- A list of all acceptable and unacceptable uses of the Play Street should be defined prior to implementation.
  - Having these lists ahead of time will help increase potential safety (e.g. no sledding, no motorized carts or bikes, etc.) in the Play Street and will aide enforcement efforts if needed.
  - Police and Public Works Departments should coordinate efforts to define appropriate uses and the steps necessary to educate the public.
- A list of physical play devices that are acceptable and unacceptable should be defined prior to implementation.
  - Play devices such as portable hockey goals, portable basketball hoops, etc. will need to be defined as appropriate or not. Similarly, the appropriate physical location of some devices may need to be determined (such as a basketball hoop may be acceptable if placed along a curb or in a parking zone, but may not be acceptable if placed within the “traveled way” of the roadway).
- Play device removal protocol should be developed.
  - The timeframe in which play equipment must be removed should be defined. Examples: each time a car approaches, at the end of play, when the game players vacate the street, before sunset.

### **Other Potential Issues Within the Play Street Area**

- Emergency vehicle access issues and concerns should be discussed ahead of time with all emergency response providers. This discussion may influence the permitted devices list.
- On-street parking restrictions should be considered within the play area.
  - It may be difficult to restrict on-street parking within the Play Street area on a local roadway with residential frontage, particularly if some residents within the area are not supportive of the Play Street, and would resent the loss of parking. However, minimizing parking would improve visibility and improve safety within the Play Street.

- Issues may arise between neighbors if some residents choose to park their vehicle outside of the Play Street area in front of someone else's home.
- Informational materials may be used to recommend off-street parking by residents within a designated Play Street area.

### **Funding for Play Streets**

- An application fee should be considered.
  - An application fee could cover the jurisdictional staffing and administration necessary for the program, and the cost should be based on this level of effort.
  - While it is recognized that fees may not become available to the department charged with implementing Play Streets, they may be valuable to deter unwarranted requests.
- Who pays for the necessary signing and pavement markings that delineate a Play Street?
  - A cost contribution from residents voting for a Play Street could be considered.
- Who pays for the removal of the signing and pavement markings when the Play Street is no longer in effect?
  - The initial residents voting for the Play Street may no longer live on the street. The initial fees could also cover the ultimate removal costs.
- See also **Staffing Implications** and **Enforcement Implications** for funding issues.

### **Removing a Play Street Designation**

- It is critical that a Play Street designation be removed when children have grown or moved and no longer routinely play in the street.
  - Procedures should be developed that define how the need or warrant for a Play Street is monitored over time. An annual permit could be required to keep a Play Street in force.
- Who initiates the removal request?
  - The removal could be requested by staff, residents, or others.
- Should a notification process for affected households be developed and implemented?
  - Jurisdictional staff time required to send a notification of pending Play Street designation removal should be considered.

### **Development of Appropriate Policies, Regulations, Ordinances**

- Is there a need to develop a Play Street Program?
  - If it is anticipated that frequent requests may be received, an established program will help a jurisdiction with consistent and efficient response.
- Is there a need to develop specific policies and/or local ordinances to support the implementation of Play Streets?
  - Local agencies have varying levels/types of policies and local ordinances.
- Are there specific regulations that need to be developed to govern Play Street uses, users, and motorists?

- Each local agency could tailor this to citizen requests/concerns.
- Is there a need to define appropriate penalties and/or consequences for user and motorist violations on Play Streets?
  - These are not specifically addressed in the State Uniform Vehicle Code.
- The development and application of local Play Street regulations need to be considered in the context of existing State Statutes.
  - There is the potential for overlaps that should be considered and addressed such that conflicts do not occur that would invalidate local ordinances. A review of example language from other communities may be appropriate.

### **Enforcement Issues**

- Are there specific criteria for issuing warnings and citations for inappropriate activity in a Play Street?
  - The level of enforcement should be considered for the overall program.
- Will there be a heightened level of traffic speed enforcement in and around a Play Street?
  - This may have staffing implications for patrol units, or may divert speed enforcement from other areas in the community. It is likely that there will be little potential to increase enforcement on streets designated as Play Streets, and the public should be made aware of this limitation at the beginning of the Play Street application process.
- Enforcement and Public Works staff should communicate and coordinate response to requests for Play Streets.
- Dispute mediation should be anticipated.
  - Law enforcement officers may be called to mediate disputes between neighbors in the vicinity of a Play Street who do not share the same view of appropriate use of a Play Street.

### **Jurisdictional Staffing Issues**

- Is additional staffing required?
  - If there is no additional funding for staffing the Play Street program implementation, then other programs or tasks may suffer. Tradeoffs may need to be made.
- Initial staffing implications to organize and define issues and procedures for on-going management and implementation of Play Streets should be considered.

### **CLOSING**

The magnitude of issues addressed by the guidelines and considerations illustrate the complexity of implementing a comprehensive Play Street program. It is not a simple issue, and one size does not fit all when children's safety is at stake.

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