

2014 Gay Games Sustainability Report



Sustainability Report Overview

The 2014 Gay Games, presented by the Cleveland Foundation, took place in the cities of Cleveland + Akron from August 9-16, 2014 with an estimated 7,000 participants, 3,000 volunteers, and thousands of additional visitors engaging in more than sporting and cultural events. The Games helped to place Cleveland and Akron on an international stage and contributed estimated tens of millions of dollars in economic impact to the region.

The Cleveland Special Events Corporation, dba Gay Games 9 (GG9), is the registered 501(c)(3) organization that planned, organized, and hosted the 2014 Gay Games. Aware of the scope and scale of the 2014 Gay Games, GG9 staff made a firm commitment to maximizing the positive economic and social impacts of the Games, while minimizing its environmental impact on the region, by creating the first sustainability plan in the 32-year history of the Gay Games. Through our work, we have developed a solid foundation upon which subsequent host cities can build to continue harnessing the tremendous potential for positive social, cultural, political, economic, and environmental change which the Games represent.

Sustainability definition: GG9 defines sustainability using the principles of the Triple Bottom Line. GG9 takes a holistic approach to its operations, focusing on economic success, social responsibility, and environmental stewardship in its operations.

Sustainability mission statement: GG9 endeavors to make the 2014 Gay Games, presented by the Cleveland Foundation, the most sustainable Gay Games to date and, furthermore, to provide a legacy of sustainability upon which future Gay Games can build.



Outcomes of the 2014 Gay Games sustainability initiatives

Cognizant of the fact that the cities of [Cleveland](#) and [Akron](#) have made firm commitments to sustainability in recent years, GG9 crafted and implemented a strategy to minimize the impact of the Games upon the environment and to utilize our natural resources in a more mindful, efficient manner. GG9's environmental stewardship strategy had five focus areas: water, waste management, sustainable transportation, local food, and greening our internal operations. Each of these areas is detailed below.

Target area 1: Water

Overview: We sought to minimize the waste generated from plastic water bottle use by encouraging participants, volunteers, and spectators to bring their own bottles and by partnering with local vendors to provide alternatives to bottled water.

Goals:

- Eliminating bottled water from volunteer hospitality at all Gay Games venues.
- Launch a Bring Your Own Bottle (BYOB) campaign to encourage participants, volunteers, and spectators to bring their own water bottles to the Games, rather than relying on bottled water. Work to procure reusable water bottles to provide for participants and volunteers who do not have their own bottles, where available.
- Secure in-kind sponsorships from water providers in order to have potable water on hand at downtown Cleveland locations for participants and volunteers.
- Include information regarding the location of drinking foundations and other water sources in the maps/information for each venue.

Outcomes: By partnering with local nonprofit organization [Drink Local. Drink Tap., Inc.](#), we were able to secure in-kind water donations from [Pure Water Technology](#) and the [City of Cleveland's Division of](#)



Four of the water purifiers from Pure Water Technology, which were located at Cleveland State University Woodling Gymnasium.

[Water](#). PWT provided 15 tankless water purifiers at Cleveland State University and Case Western Reserve University, while the City of Cleveland brought its water truck to the triathlon, Dancin'/Festival Village (Sunday, August 10), and the 5k road race. Moreover, we were able to provide water at several other events, including softball and volleyball.

Ultimately, these efforts enabled us to avoid the use of more than 2,446 bottles of water. If you stacked

these bottles upright, they would total 1,590 feet in height; put another way, these bottles would reach the top of the Terminal Tower (708 feet) twice with another 174 feet to spare.

Through our website and social media outreach, we also encouraged participants, volunteers, and spectators to bring their own water bottles to the Games. Several vendors and partner organizations also provided complimentary bottles at Festival Village, which furthered this effort.

Target area 2: Waste Stream/Waste Management

Overview: GG9 committed to promoting zero waste principles at our events, in recognition of the fact that 2014 is the [Year of Zero Waste in the City of Cleveland](#).

Goals:

- Divert at least 40% of total waste generated from landfills.
- Have recycling available at all venues in downtown Cleveland and Akron.
- Adopt zero waste policies for major Cleveland and Akron venues, enabling the 2014 Gay Games to provide a positive example for the Year of Zero Waste 2014.
- Develop an effective communication policy for waste management goals.
- Provide support to vendors and venues to help them develop waste management plans in order to limit their waste generation and support overall waste management goals.

Outcomes: We provided recycling bins and facilities at all of our venues in downtown Cleveland and Akron. Several other venues also had on-site recycling available, including Case Western Reserve University, the Cleveland Metroparks, Cleveland State University, OBM Arena, the University of Akron, and Whiskey Island. In addition, Coca Cola, one of our corporate sponsors, donated 10 recycling bins, which we utilized at Festival Village throughout the week of the Games.

In our sustainability plan, we set a goal of diverting 40% of our total waste from landfills. Due to limited human and financial resources and logistical challenges, we made the decision to focus our attention on the two sites where we had control over our waste – the Cleveland Convention Center (our command center during Games week) and Festival Village. We worked with the custodial staff to keep track of the amount of waste and recycling that



Recycling from the Gay Games triathlon event at the East 9th Street pier in downtown Cleveland.

they collected throughout the course of the week. This partnership allowed us to determine that we recycled 53% of our total waste at these venues, by volume; however, when you accounted for the total weight, we ultimately diverted 29% of the total waste, falling shy of the 40% goal.¹

In order to support the implementation of our waste diversion plan, we recruited sustainability volunteers, who provided direction to participants, spectators, and other volunteers on the locations of

¹ To keep track of weight, custodial workers tallied the total number of trash and recycling bags that they collected from Sunday, August 10-Saturday, August 16. Based on their numbers, we disposed a total of 489 bags of trash and 542 bags of recycling. At this point, we took a randomized sample of each type, weighing three separate bags of trash and recycling to find a median weight for each bag. Through this process, we estimated that each bag of trash weighed approximate 22 pounds, while each bag of recycling weighed 8 pounds. We then averaged this out over the total number of bags, estimating that we generated a total of 10,758 pounds of trash (71% of total weight) and 4,336 pounds of recycling (29% of total weight).

recycling and trash facilities, water fountains/containers, and secure bike parking (where available). These volunteers provided a vital resource both for GG9 staff and for the venues where they were stationed. A total of 238 sustainability volunteers served at the following venues:

- Case Western Reserve University – 36 volunteers
- Cleveland Convention Center – 89 volunteers
- Cleveland State University – 11 volunteers
- Festival Village – 38 volunteers
- John S. Knight Center (Akron) – 21 volunteers
- Renaissance Cleveland Hotel – 43 volunteers

But our waste diversion efforts did not end with the Games; if anything, they simply picked up steam. As the Games concluded, it became clear that we had a large number and array of items of which we needed to dispose. Accordingly, the GG9 sustainability team worked closely with the GG9 operations team to develop a plan in order to dispose of these items in a socially and environmentally responsible manner. In the days and weeks after the Games concluded, we took the following steps:

- Donated 1,213 pounds of food (fruit, snacks, pastries) to the [2100 Lakeside Men's Homeless Shelter](#) (1,074 lbs.) and the [Greater Cleveland Food Bank](#) (139 lbs.)
- Composted 85 pounds of fruit at [the Ohio City Farm](#), a six-acre urban farm located just west of downtown Cleveland
- Donated 1,152 individual packs of tissues to the Cleveland Metropolitan School District's [Project ACT program](#) for homeless youth
- Donated leftover participant bags, condoms, office supplies, and cups to the [LGBT Community Center of Greater Cleveland](#), one of our Lead Community Partners
- Donated 21 medical/first aid kits to [The Free Medical Clinic of Greater Cleveland](#)
- Sent more than 750 leftover plastic cards to [Upcycle Parts Shop](#)
- Provided approximately 10 banners, volunteer t-shirts, and office furniture to [the Cleveland Bazaar](#) for reuse, resale, and upcycling
- Recycled 1,729.5 pounds of leftover marketing materials/paper goods, 226 signs, 23 banners, 520 participant bags, and 81 plastic buckets through [Northcoast Recycling](#).



Leftover signs, banners, marketing materials, and cardboard boxes that we recycled through Northcoast Recycling after the Games.

Target area 3: Sustainable Transportation

Overview: GG9 worked to provide alternative transportation options to all of our participants, volunteers, and spectators.

Goals:

- Ensure that mass transportation is available for all participants via Greater Cleveland RTA, Metro Akron, Lake Tran, and other partners.
- Work with public transit agencies to provide free/discounted transit passes to participants and volunteers.
- Provide secure bike parking for at least one downtown Cleveland venue.
- Work with partner organizations to develop a cycling guide that highlights cycling routes and bike parking in Cleveland and Akron.
- Develop a communications plan to promote alternative transportation modes for participants, volunteers, and spectators.
- Encourage travelers flying into Cleveland and Akron to purchase carbon offsets.



Outcomes: We partnered with the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority, Metro Akron, and Lake Tran, the public transportation agencies for Cuyahoga, Summit, and Lake Counties, respectively, to provide participants with free access to Northeast Ohio's public transportation systems. The Games represented the first time that these three agencies had worked together to ensure safe, secure, simple transit for people who wished to utilize the services in the three counties. Since planning began for the Games, these three agencies [have established reciprocal fair agreements](#), meaning that riders will be able to transfer from one system to the next without incurring additional charges.

Additionally, the three agencies worked together to create a comprehensive, user-friendly transportation guide for the Games. Where existing public transportation service was not available, GG9 worked with private transportation providers to fill the gaps. This process enabled us to create a regional transportation network that guaranteed free and reliable mass transit to all participants. Additionally, GG9 volunteers and spectators had the option to purchase a discounted "Friend and Family" pass for the week of the Games, which granted them access to this network. We sold 36 such passes.

We partnered with [Bike Cleveland](#) to implement bicycling serves. This partnership enabled us to secure sponsorships from [The Bike Rack](#) and the [Ohio City Bicycle Coop](#). We also teamed up with Cleveland Bike Tours and Bob's Bike Tours to give discounted bicycle tours of Cleveland to GG9 participants. All of this information was contained in a special [GG9 Biking in Cleveland Guide](#) from Bike Cleveland, which was available on our website and distributed at various events/venues. During the week of the Games, participants rented 12 bikes from OCBC (9 of which helped their riders secure medals in our cycling

events) and 21 bikes from The Bike Rack. The Bike Rack also provided GG9 staff with the use of 3 commuter bikes for transportation during the Games.

We were able to provide attendees with access to bike parking at most of our venues throughout Cleveland and Akron. Furthermore, the Ohio City Bicycle Co-op provided us 5 bike racks for use at Festival Village and Closing Ceremony. Our sustainability volunteers monitored these bike racks, granting safe and secure bike parking for people visiting Mall C or the Cleveland Convention Center.

Lastly, we encourage travelers flying into Cleveland and Akron to purchase carbon offsets either through our air partner, United: <http://www.united.com/web/en-US/content/contact/products/carbonoffset.aspx> or the Cleveland Carbon Fund: <http://www.clevelandcarbonfund.org/donate/> by posting this information on our sustainability page.



Cyclists compete in the Gay Games criterium event in Lakewood, Ohio (photo courtesy of the Federation of Gay Games).

Target area 4: Local Food

Overview: Northeast Ohio has made a strong commitment to the local food movement. GG9 is cognizant of this commitment, and we worked to incorporate local food into the 2014 Gay Games.

Goals:

- Source at least 10% of our food from local vendors/producers.
- Focus on procuring local produce for volunteer hospitality needs.
- Encourage participants, volunteers, and spectators to support local restaurants, food trucks, and fruit stands whenever possible.

Outcomes: We procured 30.1% of our food from local producers/vendors, including [Bob Sferra Culinary Occasions](#), [Blue Sky Green Fields](#), and [Dave's Markets](#), surpassing our goal of sourcing 10% of our food locally. At Closing Ceremony, we had 23 local food vendors and food trucks on hand to provide food and beverages to attendees, further cementing our commitment to local food.

Target area 5: Greening GG9

Overview: GG9 staff realized that we needed to embrace sustainability in our own operations, so we worked diligently to embed it into our internal work streams.

Goals:

- Work to embed sustainability into GG9 staff and volunteers work streams.
- Ensure that a portion of GG9 merchandise is produced locally and/or sustainably.
- Partner with one or more renewable energy firms from Northeast Ohio to provide renewable energy displays at Festival Village.
- Work with press & media partners to support the communication of the 2014 Gay Games' sustainability efforts.
- Develop an engagement program to discuss sustainability with participants and volunteers for the Games.
- Expand our Community Partnership Program to include sustainability partners. Secure sustainability sponsorships to finance the implementation of this plan.

Outcomes: We implemented recycling and composting in the GG9 offices. Each office had paper recycling bins, which we collected in a larger bin and recycled on-site. We also had a bin for mixed paper, plastic, aluminum, and glass recycling, which we emptied into public recycling bins on West 6th Street, accommodating for the fact that our office building does not provide mixed recycling facilities. Moreover, we developed a small-scale composting program, allowing us to compost coffee grounds and food scraps on a daily basis.

We adopted green procurement practices, sourcing sustainable office supplies whenever possible. This included purchasing office paper with at least 30% post-consumer recycled materials and other supplies, including staplers, scissors, binders, and paper goods, that contained recycled materials.

In May 2014, Pure Water Technology also donated a tankless water purifier for use in the GG9 office. GG9 staff managed to avoid the use of 1,787 bottles of water, making our total, including Games week, 4,233 bottles avoided. Those bottles would reach 2,751.5 feet tall, higher even than the Burj Dubai, the world's tallest building (2,717 feet).

We expanded our Community Partnership Program to include sustainability partners, including:

- Bike Cleveland
- City of Cleveland Office of Sustainability
- Conservancy for Cuyahoga Valley National Park
- Cuyahoga County Solid Waste Management District
- Cuyahoga Valley National Park
- Drink Local. Drink Tap., Inc.
- Earth Day Coalition
- Northeast Ohio Sierra Club
- Zero Waste NEO Network

Both The Bike Rack and the Ohio City Bicycle Co-op signed on as small business sponsors to help finance our sustainability initiatives, particularly those related to transportation.



Lessons Learned

- 1. Make a commitment to sustainability early in the game:** Implementing a sustainability plan is not something that takes care of itself. It requires a concerted effort at all levels of the organization. In order to make it a reality, you need to make a firm commitment as early as possible. With the 2014 Gay Games, incorporating sustainability was something that had been discussed on the margins from the initial days of the planning process; however, the effort did not really take off until Tim Kovach, our Project and Volunteer Manager, came on board in September 2013 and volunteered to manage the initiative. While taking action at that time enabled us to implement a plan of which we are proud, it did make the process more challenging than it likely would have been otherwise.
- 2. Do your research before developing a plan:** Sustainability is an iterative process that requires constant learning and tweaking. Simply drafting and running with a plan in a vacuum would be unwise and potentially detrimental to your cause. From the point when we committed to sustainability, we began to research extensively how previous organizers of large-scale events, particularly sporting events, had approached the topic. We read sustainability plans, reports, and lessons learned from several events and organizations, including the 2012 London Summer Olympics, the Green Sports Alliance, and the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. We also reached out to local actors working in this space to garner their input, such as the City of Cleveland's Office of Sustainability, the Zero Waste NEO network, and local sustainability practitioners, including Beau Daane and Dr. David Krueger of Baldwin Wallace University. Conducting this initial research and holding these conversations with key informants enabled us to identify our target areas, learn from the successes and failures of others, set realistic goals, and ensure that we developed a comprehensive approach.
- 3. Garner support from the organization's leadership:** The 2014 Gay Games were fortunate to have buy-in from the highest levels for our sustainability efforts. Support came from a number of individuals in key leadership positions, including our Executive Director, Director of Sports and Events, Director of Operations, and Director of Development, all of whom fully supported the concept from an early stage. Failing this, our sustainability plan never would have gotten off the ground, let alone been implemented. Garnering support from the organization's leadership is essential, as it ensures that sustainability will not only have requisite approval, but it will also be clear to the rest of the organization and the community at large that sustainability is an important consideration. This type of support lends credibility to your work.
- 4. Have a dedicated sustainability manager who is well-positioned within the organization:** As we've noted, the Games had a dedicated staff member, our Project and Volunteer Manager, who offered to develop our sustainability plan and oversee its implementation. His position within the organization ultimately proved to be an asset, as he was involved in a number of important aspects of the organization. For instance, he oversaw the Games' comprehensive project management plan, allowing us to identify places where we could incorporate

"Garnering support from the organization's leadership is essential, as it ensures that sustainability will not only have requisite approval, but it will also be clear to the rest of the organization and the community at large that sustainability is an important consideration."

sustainability initiatives. Additionally, he also helped manage the organization's finances and volunteer program, both of which were important for the success of our endeavors. Beyond his work, however, the Games also benefited from the work of our two sustainability interns, Nicole DeAnna and Marissa Lauer. As the Games drew closer, and staff members began to focus on other pressing needs, our interns were able to step in and ensure that we did not miss a beat. Nicole played a key role in developing the plan so that our efforts were ready for the start of the Games, while Marissa played a very hands-on role during the week of the Games, guaranteeing that we did not lose focus.

- 5. Ensure that you have a dedicated budget for sustainability initiatives:** While we began to work on sustainability issues in the fall of 2013, the planning process for the Games actually began much earlier – in 2011. Additionally, the final sustainability plan did not go live until March 2014. By this point, we had already developed and gotten approval from our Board of Directors of the budget for the Games. Because the sustainability conversation did not begin until much later, it effectively ensured that we did not have a dedicated budget available. This process required us to spend a lot of time trying to fight our way back upstream to incorporate sustainability components into existing plans, which limited the scope and scale of the plan in certain areas. Accordingly, we had to abandon a few aspects and rein in others in order to ensure that the plan we finally adopted was feasible. Fortunately, we were able to include some of our actions, such as providing recycling bins at all downtown Cleveland and Akron venues, into existing budget areas. Moreover, by working with our sustainability partners throughout Northeast Ohio, we managed to achieve other goals at little or no direct cost to GG9. That said, it is still accurate to say that, if we had set aside a specific budget for sustainability at an earlier stage in the planning process, we may have been able to make an even greater impact. Accordingly, we strongly urge other organizations planning such events to take this lesson into account; do not just commit to sustainability from the start, but back up this commitment with the funding necessary to make it happen.
- 6. Remain realistic when setting your sustainability goals, but be progressive:** As with all goals, identifying targets for sustainability initiatives needs to strike a fine balance between feasibility and optimism. It would be easy for an event organizer to set a goal of 100% waste diversion, but unless you have substantial human, financial, and logistical resources at your disposal, that is likely impractical. Additionally, committing to source 1% of your food from local vendors is certainly feasible, but it does not exactly inspire awe or make certain that you are maximizing your potential impact. Finding this balance was definitely a learning experience for us. In initial phases of the planning process, Tim developed highly progressive plans that may have been impractical to implement. But through an iterative process of discussion and revision, we managed to finalize a plan that was feasible, comprehensive, and progressive in nature. It's not possible to say exactly where that line will fall for any one event or organization. You need to discover it for yourself through this type of process. Much of it will be rooted in your priorities and organizational principles, while other parts will rest on more practical concerns, like financing, staffing, and logistical hurdles.
- 7. Identify key sustainability partners who can connect you with other resources:** Due to the fact that we developed the first sustainability program in Gay Games history and that none of us had overseen this type of program for such a large, complex event before, we realized that we needed to solicit support and advice from key organizations and individuals working in this space within Northeast Ohio. If you are unfamiliar with the sustainability landscape in your community, it can be tempting to just reach out to as many people as possible for input. While

this process can be effective, if you are fortunate, our experience suggests that identifying and connecting with a smaller set of well-connected, key partners represents a better use of your time and resources. By utilizing our existing connections within the community, we managed to develop a strong sense of the key entry points for various aspects of our sustainability plan. For water, this meant Drink Local. Drink Tap., Inc. For sustainability transportation, it was Bike Cleveland. For waste management, it was the Zero Waste NEO network. Each of these partners connected us with their respective networks in these areas, making it significantly easier for us to bring our plan to fruition. Identify and engage these key partners as early as possible and arrange meetings with them to draw upon their knowledge, input, and suggestions. There's no point in trying to recreate the wheel if one is already available for your use.

- 8. Develop effective, appropriate ways to track the implementation of your plan:** As the old adage goes, you cannot manage what you do not measure. Accordingly, it is paramount that you develop effective ways to track the actual implementation of your sustainability plan once it is finalized. Operationalizing this concept is something with which we struggled initially, particularly regarding how to track our waste management metrics. Eventually, after a process of trial and error, we settled on the method described earlier. Tracking local food proved to be simpler, as we kept detailed records on the types and quantities of food that we received from each vendor/supplier. Fortunately, we had partners, including the custodial crew at Festival Village, willing to work with us on these efforts. But it would have been beneficial for us to

“It is paramount that you develop effective ways to track the actual implementation of your sustainability plan once it is finalized.”

develop and communicate our ideas to these partners earlier, in order to make sure that the plans were realistic and that our partners were receptive. Developing a solid sustainability plan is one thing, but putting it into practice is another entirely. Accordingly, it would be useful to have a staff member dedicated to developing a measurement and evaluation plan parallel to the development of

the overall plan. We were able to devote one of our sustainability interns to M&E during the week of the Games, but beginning this effort at an earlier junction is preferable.

- 9. Be transparent – report your results honestly and learn from your experiences:** No organization has ever made an event completely sustainable, whatever that even means. Every event must deal with its share of positives and negatives when it comes to sustainability. But being upfront with your goals and reporting honestly on your outcomes is essential. Transparency and accountability are crucial components of sustainability. Moreover, explaining how and why you came up short of your goals (if applicable) provides an important learning opportunity both for your organization and for other event organizers interested in trying their hand at sustainability. Knowing what to avoid when trying to minimize bottled water use or to encourage people to walk/bike to your event is just as, if not more, important that knowing what worked for other events. It is also essential to be honest and forthright when reporting back to your community, partners, sponsors, and supporters. If you state that you met or surpassed one of the goals in your plan, but these groups later find out otherwise, your credibility will be harmed, and they may be less likely to back your organization in the future.

Conclusion

Through our work and the generous support of our sustainability partners and sponsors, the 2014 Gay Games were the greenest, most sustainable Gay Games in the 32-year history of the event. By being proactive and developing a comprehensive, progressive plan months in advance of the Games, we were able to lay the foundation for future Gay Games and serve as a useful case study for other comparable sports and cultural events. While we did not achieve every one of the goals we identified (e.g. falling short of our 40% waste diversion target), we did manage to overcome a number of obstacles, both resource-wise and logistical, to succeed in “maximizing the positive economic and social impacts of the Games, while minimizing its environmental impact” on Northeast Ohio.



If you have any questions regarding GG9’s sustainability initiatives or this report, please contact:

- Tim Kovach, Project & Volunteer Manger
Email: tkovach@gg9cle.com
Phone: (216) 479-6313