

Rally Organizing Demystified—An Approach

Gordie Davidson

This article is targeted at those folks who just might have a desire to organize a COAA sponsored event in their neck of the USA. The process is really not intimidating, especially if you get things right up front. Don't know where to start? Then grab yourself a cup of coffee and read on—what follows is an approach that has worked well for this author.

For simplicity, structure, and ease of referral, I have broken this narrative into four sequential phases – the first three are planning focused with the final phase being the actual execution of the event.

- I. Initial Planning Phase
- II. Support Planning Phase
- III. Final Planning Phase
- IV. Execution Phase

Up Front - one cannot over emphasize the need to **plan ahead**—a few expressions or words of wisdom come to mind reference planning:

- *Plan Your Work and Work Your Plan*
- *People Don't Plan to Fail, They just Fail to Plan*
- *Proper Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance*

With this simple, yet most important emphasis on planning, let's examine each of the four phases of organizing a successful COAA event.

I. Initial Planning Phase (10-15 months out)

This is the most important phase of the four—you will expend most of your thinking, scheming and schmoozing energy here. This is where you design and lay the foundation for the remaining phases and event execution.

Determine Venue Potential

Physically walk the venue to visualize how large and small organs might integrate together—is there room for both categories of instruments? Should this be a combined event or small organ rally only? Is parking convenient? Restrooms? Food places? Electricity? Will there be audio competition from live bands or PA systems? These are a few of the questions usually easy to answer—the most important venue selection question is will there be hundreds or thousands of spectators in attendance? If the answer is no or maybe no spectators, stop the planning. We do not need another rally venue without people. Assuming positive venue potential, then move on to the validation process.

Validate Venue

Personally seek out the movers and shakers of the venue/community such as the Mayor, the City Manager, the Chamber President, or any other important personalities. Meet them face to face to determine if they want to co-sponsor an event with COAA. Do not send an impersonal introductory email but rather get on the calendars of the right folks and establish a relationship. This is the single most important step. Do your homework and be prepared to answer two questions, (1) what is a band organ rally? And, (2) why should we co-sponsor an event with COAA?

Both questions are easy to answer (a video is worth a thousand words); take your pre-loaded laptop or DVD player along with your well rehearsed presentation to view previous rally videos. Keep it short, maybe five minutes max. Show a couple of street organs featuring interaction with the public and one large organ with the public viewing. Be sure to pick lively tunes most will recognize. Co-sponsoring allows the chamber to (1) support the effort, and (2) exercise minimal control. Support refers mostly to providing dollars and publicity. Control is more a figurative thing, that is, the chamber has bought in, but really does not desire to run and manage another event—they're pleased you are doing all the organizing and work.

If you get a buy-in from the movers and shakers grease the skids with a follow-up presentation to the next monthly Chamber of Commerce and City Council meetings in that order. Remember, the chamber has the money. Focus accordingly, be brief, be bright, and be gone. I even took my busker organ to set the mood for what I was offering. All you're looking for from the city is approval to conduct the event and possible coordination support. The city, more than likely, will want to be named on the group's liability insurance policy. This is not an issue as the COAA is covered.

The chamber presentation is an extension of your first preparatory meeting with the president. Be prepared to answer the first two questions plus a third—what will the rally do for the community? The answer is twofold: (1) the rally will bring lots of folks to the venue, and (2) thousands of dollars in local, indirect spending by visitors and COAA members (food & beverage, motels, retail, etc). Recommend you prepare a brief talking points handout for each chamber member documenting everything you discuss. Bring up your group requirements at this first meeting, aka financial support. Tell them what you anticipate for expenses, your anticipated income and anticipated shortfall. This entire process requires the fine art of salesmanship and schmoozing. Be positive and emphasize the **fun** aspect of a rally.

Eventually there will be a motion to vote on your request for sponsorship and financial support. Word your request not as a “not-to-exceed support contribution of perhaps \$1,000,” but you really anticipate a need of perhaps \$400-\$700. You will only ask for one check 60-90 days out from event. Avoid a reimbursement scheme that requires submission of itemized receipts (a nightmare for you and unnecessary bookkeeping for them). It’s just easier to issue one check made out to COAA.

Finally, go through this process 10-12 months out—up front in the fiscal year and budgeting process with a recorded approval in the minutes. Approved minutes come in handy later in the year when new chamber members come on board/ New members tend to support previous approval actions. Getting approval and financial support early makes the next three phases a breeze to coordinate.

II. Support Planning Phase (8-10 months out)

Now that the Chamber and City have approved you, you can begin the detailed coordination required to make the rally happen. I’ll address some of the common actions to be coordinated. There will be other requirements unique to a particular venue, plan accordingly in this phase.

Publicity

There is an age old question in advertising that goes like this: you know what happens when you don’t advertise? Nothing! Now that you have your rally approved, get the word out. Fortunately there are several avenues to pursue:

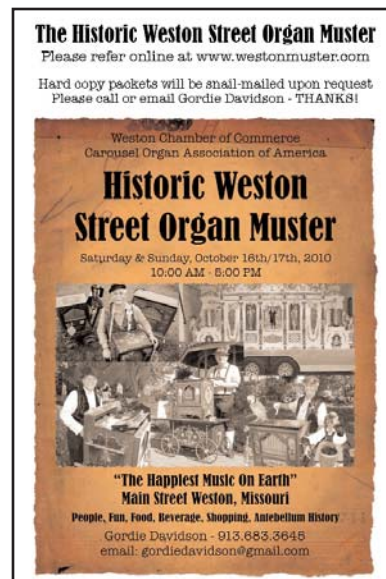
1. Dedicated Web Site: this is by far the most cost efficient, effective means to communicate with the COAA membership and general public. Everyone has access to the internet or knows someone that does. You can use one of several web authoring applications or online web creation sites—most are free or cost a few dollars. You can register a primary domain name for about \$10. I registered www.westonmuster.com and authored the site with Rapidweaver for Mac. Completely intimidated by computers? Perhaps the Chamber can assist or you have that proverbial geek grandson who can put together a web site with your content guidance. Finally, you can easily post notes of thanks, images and YouTube videos after the event.
2. COAA Web Site: the COAA web site will advertise your event with dates as well as host your downloadable documents. This is a “no brainer”—use it!
3. Posters: I recommend you design a poster stating that the Chamber and COAA are co-sponsoring a rally with the need-to-know facts. Creativity is welcome: you do not have to necessarily use the word

rally—I’ve seen terms like muster, recall, festival and others used with equal success. Pictures or illustrations always help to define what is coming to town. I designed the poster for Weston and convinced the Chamber to print 100 copies for distribution in town and to attendees. If you’re lucky, maybe the Chamber will have a graphic artist. Go for it—the only challenge will be maintaining your personal discipline to meet deadlines.



A poster collage used to illustrate what is coming to town.

4. The COAA Journal: for a small fee, you can purchase full page ads in the COAA Journal. I recommend two to three issues before your event. Communicate directly with the editor for actual deadlines and formatting instructions. I used the dedicated poster with supplemental instructions for direct mail requests: another “no brainer”—use it!



A rally poster used effectively as an pre-rally advertisement in the *Carousel Organ*.

5. Mechanical Music Digest: the online MMD forum is the Gold Standard for reaching worldwide mechanical music enthusiasts. Most rally attendees in the USA are subscribers. As a general rule, the

MMD editor will allow two postings announcing your rally. Backward plan accordingly: not too soon and not too late. I recommend the rally host/planner maintain control of announcement timing and communicate directly with the MMD editor.

6. **Direct Mail:** this method is the least effective and cost efficient. There is a core group of less than 100 COAA members who attend and support the rallies. Mailing an envelope to each of the nearly 500, worldwide COAA members is inexcusable. This is a waste of precious association funds and it costs hundreds of dollars annually. For Weston, I made it clear that anyone could call or email to request a direct mailing: one person did and I promptly supported. My postage, paper and envelope expense was \$1.22 (there was no printing, stuffing, labeling and envelope sealing party).

Lodging

Members and guests will be supporting you from all over the USA—locating a central lodging facility is paramount to your success. It becomes yours headquarters for housing, instrument storage, entertainment, dining, fellowship and reminiscing. I would look for walking access to restaurants; secure parking; user-friendly management; reasonable fees and quality meeting facilities.

Food & Beverage Snacks

Providing snacks and drinks during a rally weekend is another optional activity dependent upon the dynamics of the venue. Ask yourself: will everyone have convenient access to a vendor or store to purchase meals & drinks? If not, you may desire to provide basic cold drinks and munchies from a central location or perhaps rove with a cooler or distribute from a car or other vehicle—a cold bottle of water is always appreciated. Use your judgment and creativity here.

Entertainment

This is a judgment call only you can make. The tendency is to pack too many activities into one day, particularly Saturday. Remember, the event is an organ rally. People expect you to provide a **fun** environment with hundreds of spectators and that generally is an 8-hour day plus transit times. I recommend you allow some freshening-up time after the long grinding session. A Saturday evening meal is expected. No recommendation here other than to avoid sitting down in mass at a restaurant—try to find a private facility for the group. I recommend no activity after the meal. Let people sort themselves out: some will visit and some will retire for the evening. Again, no hard rules here: if you can feed and entertain simultaneously at a local collection or venue, go for it. Bottom line: do not commit folks to a 15-hour day and you'll have fewer no shows.

Scheduling

Try to publish a schedule up front that is 95% accurate with times and activities. Grinding times should reflect when the general public is expected to participate. There is no need to start too soon or run too late. Some venues will require staging of instruments by a certain time—coordinate this carefully with venue management and determine who will be the 'go to' person on the ground. Rehearse the staging process and have situational awareness of the entire venue area.

Communicating

This is easy with your dedicated web site, the COAA web site and email—use and update accordingly. Provide periodic updates to the Chamber President and/or key movers and shakers of your event. Get on monthly meeting calendars to provide periodic live updates as there will be new Chamber members who need to be updated on your event. Attending a meeting or two maintains your credibility; keeps the enthusiasm factor high; and makes it easy to ask for that support check in the spring.

Miscellaneous

I highly recommend you personally meet with the Chief of Police. Provide him the same overview you've provided everyone else. Do not assume he is in the knowledge loop on the details of your event. It is here you can anticipate and de-conflict any potential issues with parking, street closures, and the need for parking cones, etc. The Chief will be pleased you coordinated with him as most event planners miss this step. Make sure he knows you are the 'go to' person for all rally related issues.



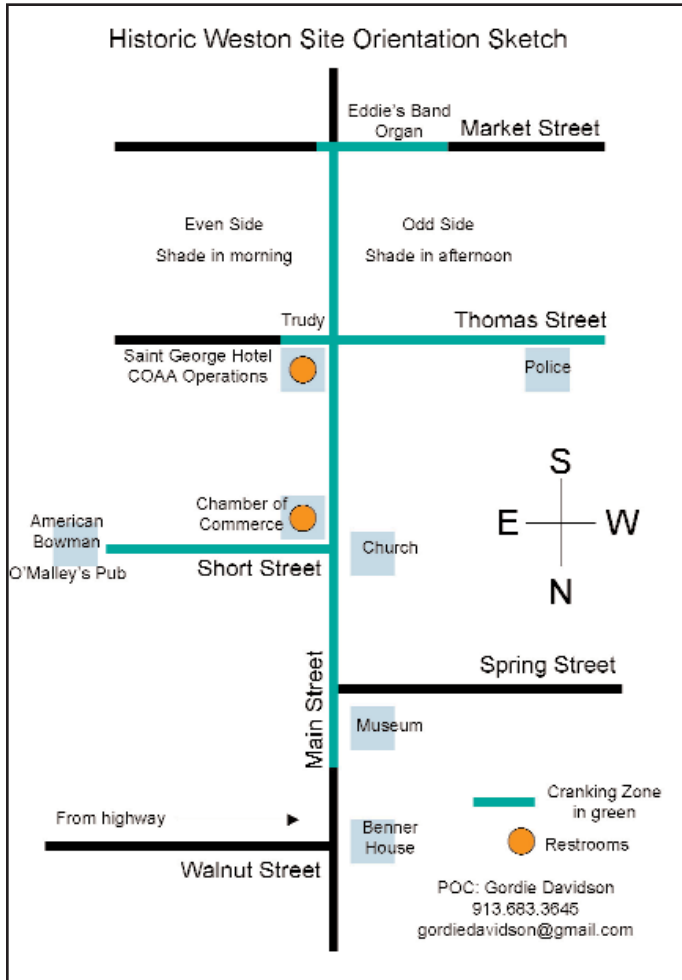
Name tags for participants can even be made for special instruments (see inset).

III. Final Planning Phase (15-30 days out)

This phase is mostly administrative labor and can be fun to do in anticipation of the rally. Hopefully you have 90% of your registrations: now you can prepare rosters and name tags. I even prepared one for *Trudy*, David and Darlene Wasson’s magnificent concert band organ. Prepare a few blank kits for walk-on participants as they seem to appear at most events. You may consider pre-positioning band organs depending on the venue. This is a judgment call. Street organs seem to naturally sort themselves out.



Mayor Greg Hoffman (right) presenting a rally certificate.



An orientation sketch with key locations for the rally.

Take the necessary time to double check most previous coordination activities, particularly lodging and the Saturday evening dinner. I prepared an orientation sketch or layout of the venue with key locations. The Chamber will likely provide you with welcome kits as needed. These are handy and sometimes include discount coupons.

Finally, coordinate Certificates of Achievement by name for all registered participants from the Chamber

and/or the Mayor. These add a personal touch of quality to your rally. I found it more efficient to publish the certificates then get them signed. Another judgment call based on the efficiency of those supporting you.

Finally, you might begin preparing your rally accounting ledger with all the figures fresh on your mind—this will make the final closeout easy.

IV. Execution Phase (the rally)

The easy part—”let the fun begin!” You’ve planned your work, now work your plan; tweak and trouble-shoot as needed during the weekend. Take lots of pictures and videos on the first day in particular as you may lose some folks on the second day. Do not forget a group shot as these images will come in handy for the annual *COAA Rally Edition* plus you’ll be able to post on your dedicated web site and/or YouTube.

Does rally organizing seem like a lot of work? You bet, but well worth the effort and super satisfying when all is done and the last musical note is sounded. The goal for any event is win—win—win! That is, **win** for attendees, **win** for COAA and **win** for community. The number of people managing an event is up to you, the host. I have found over the years that one guy gets it done in 30-minutes; two guys need 60-minutes; and three guys need 90-minutes. Organize to your personal comfort index and management style. Within the suggested guidance of this article, there will be periods of frustration and wheel spinning. That’s OK, just apply the wisdom of Marine Gunny Tom Highway: **Improvise, Adapt, and Overcome.**

This article has outlined an approach to rally organizing. There are others. I remain on call to anyone who desires to chat about planning and organizing a rally. Hopefully a reader or two has been inspired to make the leap and become a host; if so, go for it!

Gordie Davidson is a retired army engineer officer and continues to serve as an army civilian at Fort Leavenworth. His interest in mechanical music began in 1981 with a 4-year assignment to the Berlin Brigade. He has organized rallies and written extensively on grinding for profit. His most recent COAA event was the Historic Weston Street Organ Muster. Readers can view pictures and videos of this event at www.westonmuster.com.