

## PANDEMIC RECOVERY AND BEYOND

# Reimagining Our Streets

*“The streets and cities we see on the other side of the pandemic will be different from the ones we knew a few short months ago. As city and transportation leaders, our job is not to return to the inequitable, dangerous, unsustainable patterns of the past, but to help shape a better future. The streets we create today will provide the foundation for our recovery for years to come.”*

*– “Streets for Pandemic Response and Recovery,” National Association of City Officials and Global Designing Cities Initiative*

The COVID-19 crisis has reminded us of the centrality and potential of streets to create safe, healthy and vital places for active transportation, commercial and social activity, and community expression.

In this transition and beyond, local governments can calm streets and increase the amount of outdoor space available to help businesses and neighborhoods recover and prosper.

### Cities and counties can help lead the way:

- ▶ Rearrange streets to slow traffic and create more space for walking, biking and outdoor activity.
- ▶ Allow flexibility with clear, simple procedures for the use of public streets and sidewalks for physically distanced commercial activity and services.
- ▶ Allow flexibility and relax rules governing the use of private outdoor spaces for physically distanced commercial activity and services.
- ▶ Provide resources and services to facilitate and support these outdoor activities for individual businesses, neighborhoods and commercial districts.



# Why Streets Matter

## Slow and Safe

To be successful at encouraging active transportation and outdoor activity, space alone isn't enough — it also requires slowing vehicle traffic. Slow streets create safe and vital space for people in residential neighborhoods, corridors, main streets and downtowns.

When the pandemic swept the country in March 2020, vehicle traffic dropped in major cities. Smoggy skies cleared over Los Angeles and New York City, and local residential streets were retrofitted with pop-up walking and cycling corridors. With more commuters at home, observers surmised less driving could mean fewer traffic fatalities.

But that didn't happen. As many as 42,0603 people died on U.S. roads last year, or 8% more than in 2019, according to preliminary data released by the National Safety Council. Combined with a 13% decline in vehicle-miles traveled, the rate of death on American roads jumped 24% year over year — the sharpest spike that the Council has measured since 1924.

The deadliest metro areas and states for pedestrians have been identified in the newest edition of "Dangerous by Design 2021," released in June 2021 by Smart Growth America and the National Complete Streets Coalition. California ranks as the 17th-most "dangerous" state, with Bakersfield (2), Stockton-Lodi (15), Fresno (21), Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario (23), San Diego-Carlsbad (55), Oxnard-Thousand Oaks (58) and San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward (90) among the nation's top-100 worst metro areas.

Over the past decade (2010-19), the number of people struck and killed by drivers nationwide while walking increased by an astonishing 45%, even as overall fatalities for drivers and passengers increased by just 3.7%. The most recent years on record (2016-19) are now the four deadliest years for pedestrian deaths since 1990. During this ten-year period, 53,435 people were hit and killed by drivers. In 2019, the equivalent of more than 17 people a day were killed.

This risk is not evenly distributed: Black Americans, older adults, people walking in low-income communities, and indigenous people all die at higher rates and face higher levels of risk compared to all Americans. This reality makes it imperative that communities proactively address these inequities as a priority in their slow-street initiatives.

## Economic Recovery and Reimagining Public Spaces

Even before the pandemic, rethinking public spaces by slowing and converting streets and sidewalks for outdoor dining and shopping has been critical in helping local businesses and their employees thrive. These innovative approaches will continue to be vital in the economic recovery.



Local businesses create jobs that support our families and social activity that invigorates our communities, while also generating substantial revenue for the essential public services that local governments provide.

Small and medium-sized businesses, which often have it rough even in good times, have been hit hard by the pandemic. And when businesses struggle, the ripple effect can be equally harsh for local governments.

The U.S. Census Bureau's Small Business Pulse Survey found that, in May 2021, the pandemic had had a large or moderate negative impact on 72% of California's small businesses.

In California, there were more than 1.8 million restaurant and food-service jobs in 2019, representing 11% of pre-pandemic employment in the state. In 2018, California's restaurants had \$97 billion in estimated sales. Every dollar spent in dine-in restaurants contributes \$2.03 to the state economy.

Cities rely on sales-tax revenue from restaurants and transient-occupancy taxes from hotels. In Fresno, for example, restaurants generate \$10 million in sales-tax revenue, while Berkeley estimates that food products made up 34.5% of its sales-tax revenue as of 2018.

Transient-occupancy taxes, imposed by most California cities and counties, range from 3.5% to 15%. Transient-occupancy taxes provide 7% of a city's general revenue on average, and as much as 17% in some cities.

In the restaurant and food-service industry alone, the National Restaurant Association reported that last year 900,000 to 1 million jobs were lost in California (although some are returning with the limited reopening of restaurants). Nationwide, restaurants and food-service sales were down \$240 billion from expected levels for 2020, along with sharp reductions in spending at non-restaurant food-service operations in the lodging, arts/entertainment/recreation, education, healthcare and retail sectors.

Over the past year-and-a-half, the expansion of parklets and open-street programs in California cities big and small have helped many restaurants and retail stores survive. While bringing in sales that have kept these enterprises afloat during the pandemic, the positive experiences with parklets and open streets has demonstrated to residents, community leaders and city officials that these experiments with the re-design of our public spaces can continue to be bright spots for economic growth and a reassuring glimpse of a vibrant future.

# Open Streets and Parklets

The open streets, parklets, and outdoor dining and retail ordinances that many cities have implemented during the pandemic provide good models for continuing actions to foster economic recovery safe, healthy and walkable neighborhoods, and reduced car dependency to meet everyday needs.

Open-streets programs temporarily close streets to cars for use by people for walking, jogging, rolling, biking, skating and other types of exercise, and social and educational activities.

California's first open-streets event – Car-Free Sundays in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park – was staged in 1967, nine years before Bogota, Colombia, introduced the weekly closure of streets to cars for bicycling and walking (dubbed “ciclovias”) that is credited with inspiring many similar events throughout the U.S., according to the California Bicycle Coalition.

During the pandemic, John F. Kennedy Drive in Golden Gate Park has been closed to cars: Pedestrian visits are up 42% and bicyclist visits have risen 441% during that time, according to SF Recreation and Park Department data.

To boost neighborhood businesses, San Francisco closes several blocks in commercial districts on weekends or Thursday and Friday nights. It also hosts Sunday Streets, a series of monthly open-street neighborhood events; and Albany, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Redding and San Mateo have held similar events.

## Parklets during and after the Pandemic

Parklets extend sidewalks into the street by converting parking spaces to places for eating, lounging, greening and beautification. San Francisco first introduced the parklet in 2010, following an unofficial temporary conversion of an on-street parking space by feeding the meter, unrolling grass sod, and placing a potted tree on top.

Numerous California cities have since adopted parklet pilots. San Francisco, Long Beach and Los Angeles are among the cities that had programs for permanent parklets in place before the pandemic.

In San Francisco, the mayor and board of supervisors have recently proposed making temporary parklets constructed during the pandemic permanent, while also factoring in the community's other interests. The legislation creates three basic categories.

The first type of parklet would be non-commercial and fully open to the public, continuing a tradition of small public spaces that spread nationally over the past decade. Movable parklets would also be allowed, providing a lower-cost option for restaurants to take over a parking space for a few



hours a day or a few days a week but otherwise allow cars to park there. The third type would allow the nearly 1,200 businesses that have installed “pop-up” parklets during the pandemic to make them permanent (with delayed fees and City permit action within 30 days.)

Oakland has allowed some parklets to extend beyond bike lanes, on a busy stretch of Telegraph Avenue in the Temescal neighborhood, for example.

# Quick Conversions of Streets and Sidewalks



**The City of Oakland Slow Streets Program** uses a modified open-streets approach to create low-speed environments with more space for pedestrian and bike activity. “Soft closure” barriers with signage have been installed to support the use of more than 21 street miles throughout the city for physically distant walking, wheelchair rolling, jogging and biking.

In response to feedback from residents in marginalized neighborhoods, a second phase of the program – “Slow Streets: Essential Places” – added intersection improvements at 21 locations in priority equity areas to support safe access to essential services such as grocery stores, food distribution sites, and COVID test sites.

The City is working with community members to improve designs and materials. A set of barricade planters with culturally relevant signage created by a local artist with residents was installed in East Oakland. The Oakland Department of Transportation sign shop is using the artwork to develop aluminum signs for other installations.

The department is currently evaluating the program to inform post-pandemic planning and implementation, with special attention given to the realities of Oakland’s inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities, and the disproportionate COVID impacts on Oakland’s Latinx and Black communities.

**Oakland’s Flex-Street Initiative** also waives fees and streamlines permitting for business use of public rights-of-way for parklets and sidewalk seating. Vacant City properties are also available for businesses



and restaurants that are unable to expand their operations on the public right-of-way or private property.

Flex Streets is set to sunset at the end of June or the end of the Alameda County emergency order (whichever comes first). The City, however, is exploring continuation of the program. The Mayor plans to ask the City Council for a program extension to fully determine how Flex Streets has impacted people and how it might continue to do so as we recover from the pandemic.

**The City of Long Beach Open Streets Program** enables businesses and residents to temporarily transform public areas into safe spaces for physically distanced activity with parklets, expanded sidewalk space and partial street closures.

Businesses submit a free online application for sidewalk dining or temporary parklets. Public Works provides barricades as needed, while establishments provide chairs, tables and any additional materials – like a parklet deck or potted plants. Some cities, such as Sacramento and Davis, have used their CARES federal stimulus money to provide grants to help with these costs.

The residential neighborhood component places temporary barricades on approved residential streets where cut-through traffic can be limited to create more outdoor space and encourage physically distanced walking, biking and skating. These streets create opportunities to get to and from destinations safely, while also providing space for healthy recreation.

Open Streets areas can remain at least through the end of June 2021, or as long physical distancing is required while engaging in outdoor activities. The City is also looking to streamline its permit process so that these temporary outdoor spaces can transition to permanent status post-pandemic.

**Los Angeles' Al Fresco Program** was launched in May 2020 to support outdoor-dining opportunities for restaurants hit hard by the pandemic. Eligible businesses were granted immediate approvals to provide outdoor seating on sidewalks and private parking lots; and the program was then expanded to include parklets and street/lane closures. Al Fresco prioritizes outreach and resources to Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) businesses and in areas with disproportionate job loss due to the pandemic.

The program is available to all restaurants and permitted sidewalk food vendors and food trucks. Eligible applicants receive immediate approval for sidewalks and private property, while applications for parklets and street/lane closures are reviewed in approximately five business days.

For parklet and street/lane closures, the City provides free traffic-control equipment (barricades, planters, bollards) and shade umbrellas where needed, prioritizing impacted/BIPOC communities. Parklet and street-closure applicants may also have access to pro bono architecture and landscape-design services. For more details: [A user-friendly manual](#)

In May 2021, the LA City Council directed city agencies to report on issues around making LA Al Fresco permanent. The mayor's proposed FY 2021-22 budget includes \$2 million for low-income neighborhood restaurants to create permanent spaces for outdoor dining.

Also launched in May, **LA's Slow Streets** program works with neighborhood organizations to place signs indicating certain residential streets are closed to cut-through traffic and urging drivers to slow down and share the road. In 30 neighborhoods, 50 miles of slow streets have been installed to date. The City is currently working to redesign the program for longer-term implementation.

In Northern California, **San Jose's Al Fresco Initiative**, which covers parklets, sidewalks, parking lots, parks, plazas and street closures, has been extended through the end of 2021. The City of **Sacramento's Farm-to-Fork Al Fresco** provides restaurants with expedited permits and grants to assist outdoor-dining options.

**San Diego's Temporary Outdoor Business Operation Permit** extends beyond eating and drinking establishments. Instituted amid health restrictions on indoor activities, this program allows the temporary use of streets, sidewalks or parking lanes. Eligible businesses include restaurants and bars, retail and wholesale businesses, gyms and fitness centers, instructional studios, personal services (including hair and nail salons and massage facilities) and places of worship.



Business Improvement Districts, shopping centers and individual businesses can apply jointly for permits, and can work together to request complete-street closures. To date, 415 projects have been approved, with permits extending to July 2022. Special Event Permits for complete-street closures expire at the end of the year they are issued and can be renewed annually.

To assist small businesses with implementation, San Diego is also providing grants up to \$3,000 for outdoor deck and platform construction compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Up to \$2,000 more is available low- and moderate-income business owners or businesses that are located in low- and moderate-income areas. Grants may be awarded prior to construction, with qualifying businesses receiving expedited, priority processing.

**Sacramento's "Slow & Active Streets"** pilot runs through July 2021, with up to six miles of streets temporarily closed to through-traffic. The City will work with neighborhoods to determine which low-traffic streets to close, and place temporary barriers, signs, cones and A-frame barricades in the streets (with federal CARES Act dollars and City Public Works funds).

# Districtwide Approaches to Reopening and Recovery

**Open Air Davis.** To help restaurants, retail and other businesses, the City of Davis has created a free expedited permit to use public spaces, enabling them to accommodate physical-distancing requirements and serve more customers. The Davis Downtown Business Association (DDBA) and the City launched “Open Air Davis,” which started with the conversion of a street and a public parking lot with weekend closures to vehicle traffic (facilitated by the City and DDBA) as well as dozens of other locations that popped up organically for outdoor seating and accommodations.

Some businesses built new patios or set up additional seating, while others have refreshed their preexisting outdoor areas. Due to its popularity and success, the program was further expanded by having both areas closed to vehicular traffic 24/7.

**Main Street Moves.** The City of Ventura initiated a 30-day pilot to allow businesses to expand their operations (with a permit) onto public or private property. In partnership with the downtown business district, Downtown Ventura Partners, the City also closed the six-block historic area to cars as part of “Main Street Moves” last summer, and approved extension of the program to January 2022.

Downtown Ventura Partners pays for the street closures, puts up the barricades, and opens the streets in the mornings for deliveries and trash pickup.

“Main Street Moves is a business-friendly solution to help our local restaurants and shops recover from the losses they have suffered during the shutdown,” said Ventura Mayor Matt LaVere, and “welcome back more customers while helping residents feel comfortable about being outdoors.”

“The public response to Main Street Moves has been overwhelmingly positive,” said Kevin Clerici, Downtown Ventura Partners’ executive director. “We are going to embark on a unique effort to actually hire an architect to look at some designs on how we can possibly change Main Street permanently.”

In Orange County, several cities have likewise created pedestrian-only commercial blocks, including The Promenade on Forest in Laguna Beach, Walk on Wilshire in Fullerton, Main Street in Huntington Beach, Old Town Placentia and Old Towne Orange.



# Best Practices for Open Streets and Public Spaces



Many cities adopted pilots and temporary programs for parklets, sidewalks, and partial and full street closures in response to the pandemic. Some of the best practices, which could be made permanent, include:

## Streamlined Permitting

- ▶ Simplified application.
- ▶ Diagrams and templates for design compliance.
- ▶ Fast-track approval with self-certification if possible for fast implementation (inspections can follow for any needed corrections or adjustments).
- ▶ Fee waivers or reductions.

## Clear Approval Requirements and Responsibilities

- ▶ Materials, traffic controls, signage and furnishings (ideally, jurisdictions provide cones, barriers, signage, etc., if possible).
- ▶ Maintenance.
- ▶ Required agreements, licenses and permits.
- ▶ ADA compliance (all permits require access compliance and minimum walkway clearance).
- ▶ Liability insurance (typically \$500,000-\$1 million, depending on jurisdiction).
- ▶ Compliance with latest Department of Alcohol Beverage Control licensing and permit requirements (COVID-19 Temporary Catering Authorization).



## Outreach and Engagement

- ▶ Residents' surveys, collaborative meetings and listening sessions for improvements that reflect the needs of specific neighborhoods, especially those suffering disproportionately from the pandemic.
- ▶ Partnerships with chambers, business and community groups and associations (implementation and marketing, and branding and communications for property and business owners, customers and residents).
- ▶ Follow-up surveys and assessments for feedback and adjustments.

## Design Assistance and Resources for Businesses

In addition to removing regulatory barriers and streamlining permitting for outdoor uses, local governments can also help provide guidance on public-space design and related assistance for small businesses.

For example, LA Al Fresco offers free design assistance to eligible businesses. Long Beach and Los Angeles have detailed handbooks, drawings and templates for designing outdoor spaces.

In Florida, West Palm Beach's "Dining on the Spot Toolkit" provides an excellent example of simple off-the-shelf, ready-to-use requirements, text, logo and door-decal templates.

The cities of Davis and Ventura partnered with local business associations for consistent branding and communications to support their commercial districts. Davis, working with Yolo County, developed a standardized health-guidelines template for posting at business sites and gave it to local printers for turn-key, on-demand production.

Local governments in the greater Sacramento region have partnered with the Sacramento Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce (spanning El Dorado, Placer, Sacramento, Sutter, Yolo and Yuba counties) to create a regional information hub that offers access to updated business resources and assistance, including a Rapid Response Business Triage hotline where callers (in English, Spanish, Vietnamese and Mandarin) can get help with a variety of business, human resources and legal issues as well as navigation of various financing tools.

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## Vision Zero: Post-Pandemic Pedestrian Safety

Pedestrian traffic fatalities increased 51% from 2009 to 2018 in the U.S. – or nearly one person every 90 minutes. A number of California cities, like San Francisco, are “Vision Zero” cities striving to reduce pedestrian fatalities and serious injuries in traffic accidents to zero – which can be naturally combined with pandemic-recovery strategies like slow streets.

**Target High-Injury Streets.** In 2018, the City of Sacramento adopted a Vision Zero Action Plan to eliminate traffic fatalities and serious injuries by 2027. The plan identified corridors with the highest levels of pedestrian injuries, finding that Sacramento’s high-injury areas comprise only 14% of its streets, but account for 79% of its fatal crashes. Priority complete-street projects were then designed to improve safety, adding protected bike lanes, a pedestrian-bike bridge and enhanced mid-block crossings.

**Add More Sidewalks.** Another concern is missing or deficient sidewalks. Data shows that a crash occurring in an area where sidewalks are missing on both sides of the street is nearly twice as likely to result in a serious injury or fatality compared to a crash in a location with a sidewalk on at least one side of the street. In response, the City of Austin, for example, adopted a Sidewalk Master Plan that accounts for safety, demand and equity factors.

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### Resources on Slow Streets

Better Block Foundation, “Using Design to Activate Spaces”  
National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO),  
“Streets for Pandemic Response and Recovery”  
NACTO, “Rapid Response: Emerging Practices for Cities”  
“The Open Streets Guide”  
Smart Growth America, “Complete Streets + COVID-19”  
“Tactical Urbanist’s Guide to Materials and Design”

# Benefits of Better Places for Today and Tomorrow

Many of these interim measures also address pre-pandemic challenges that will continue after the crisis is over, such as e-commerce impacts on retail, small businesses and downtowns. Reimagined public spaces, like parklets, open streets and slow streets, can help many businesses and commercial districts reinvent themselves; and these “new” spaces certainly offer an interactive, social experience that customers can’t get online.

These efforts should be extended – and some made permanent – because we will need to be flexible and adaptive for future partial and full closures from the next outbreaks and other natural or human-caused events. These measures must be long-lasting, since the pandemic could easily affect commerce for another 24 months, and flexible, because we will need options for businesses to generate revenue in the face of future business and regional closures.

Moreover, walkable streets are both more economically productive (more tax revenue per square foot) and healthier (more physical activity). These measures can help reduce the glut of commercial space, oversupply of parking, vacant and underutilized streets and parking.

These actions can help to reduce dependence on driving and associated vehicle miles traveled and greenhouse gas emissions – reduced vehicle use will also result in fewer traffic injuries and fatalities.

By reimagining our streets and public spaces to make it through the pandemic and beyond, we can also test and experience new ways to increase community livability, vibrancy and resilience, and reap benefits that can extend long after the current crisis.

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