


City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: JUNE 8, 2006

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER 

SUBJECT: CONSIDERATION OF A PROPOSAL TO HAVE A TRIAL PROGRAM FOR A WEEKEND PEDESTRIAN PLAZA IN THE 100 BLOCK OF KING STREET

ISSUE: Council consideration of a proposal to establish a trial program for a weekend pedestrian plaza along the 100 block of King Street for four weekends during the summer of 2006.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council:

- (1) Approve a proposal to establish a pedestrian plaza along the 100 block of King Street on a trial basis for four weekends during the summer of 2006 as outlined in this report;
- (2) Authorize closing the 100 block from Friday at 3:00 p.m. until Monday at 6:00 a.m. on four weekends: two in June and two in July; and
- (3) Allocate \$10,000 from the FY 2006 contingent reserves to pay for the expenses of this proposal.

BACKGROUND: The idea of closing a block, or blocks, on King Street to vehicular traffic has been discussed for many years, and has been put into effect occasionally in conjunction with special events, such as the fall Festival of the Arts. The adopted King Street Strategy recommended that a pilot program with a pedestrian plaza on the 100 block of King Street be initiated. As part of the implementation of the Strategy the concept of creating a pedestrian plaza on the 100 block of King Street has been discussed with business owners, property owners, and residents, and the City has received general support from these groups to undertake a pilot trial program during the summer of 2006.

Pedestrian plazas can offer numerous benefits to a commercial district and to the surrounding neighborhoods by creating a relaxing environment for walking or for respite. The 100 block of King Street, with its existing high volumes of pedestrian traffic, and its location as an essentially quasi 'dead-end' street (with King Street terminating at the waterfront) conceptually lends itself well to the concept.

In order for a pedestrian plaza to be successful along King Street, it would need to be judged as beneficial to three groups of stakeholders: residents, businesses and users. To create a plaza atmosphere that would best balance the needs of these groups, staff is recommending a four-weekend trial program of a pedestrian plaza that would be uniquely Alexandrian – a relaxing and

upscale block where people may stroll or enjoy outdoor dining without the accompaniment of vehicles or traffic noise. This four-weekend limit to the pilot program was generally supported by the Old Town Civic Association with limitations on hours and uses as outlined below when City staff met with them to explain the proposed pilot program.

DISCUSSION: Following is an overview of the major points recommended for a King Street Pedestrian Plaza, encompassing the proposed timing, fixtures, procedures and events.

TIMING: The pilot program will run for four consecutive weekends during the summer of 2006, from mid-June through mid-July.

Dates: The four weekends of the pedestrian plaza will include the following dates:

- Friday, June 16 through Sunday, June 18
- Friday, June 23 through Sunday, June 25
- Friday, June 30 through Sunday, July 2
- Friday, July 7 through Sunday, July 9

Due to the possibility of extended inclement weather during one or more of the above weekends, staff recommends that we offer two “rain date” weekends in the event that pedestrian plaza activities are curtailed due to bad weather. In the event that this occurs, staff recommends that the City Manager have the discretion to use the following two weekends in July as rain dates to compensate for significant inclement weather.

- Friday, July 14 through Sunday, July 16 (if the pedestrian plaza event for one of the previous four weekends is substantially curtailed due to inclement weather).
- Friday, July 21 through Sunday, July 23 (if the pedestrian plaza event for more than one of the previous four weekends is substantially curtailed due to inclement weather).

Times: The starting and ending times for the pedestrian plaza are proposed as the following:

- Start time: Friday afternoon, 3:00 p.m.
- Ending time: Monday morning, 6:00 a.m.

On all four weekends, the pedestrian plaza will start at 3:00 p.m. on Friday afternoon. In order to effectuate the removal of parked vehicles from the street in time for the street closure, the City will place Temporary No Parking signs along the street, indicating that parking is prohibited starting at 3:00 p.m. on Friday afternoon. These signs will be removed once the street itself is closed. The City will relocate any cars remaining on the block at 4:00 p.m.

BARRIERS: The closing of a street for use as a pedestrian plaza requires street barriers that are movable in case of emergency but sturdy enough not to be casually moved. Barriers should be very attractive to create an inviting “place” to fit with the high quality character of King Street as generally depicted in the attachments. Initially, barriers will be supplemented with signs and other elements to aid in visibility for both daytime and nighttime. If this pilot succeeds, the City will identify barriers that are appealing and contribute to the King Street ambiance.

The barrier location at the west end of the pedestrian plaza (King and Lee Streets) will also include a directional parking sign pointing motorists to off-street parking at the nearby Torpedo Factory garage.

PARKING AND TRAFFIC: The closing of a City street will result in some interruptions to existing parking and traffic patterns. On the 100 block of King Street, parking and traffic are intertwined issues. Because the street ends at the river, there is not a large volume of through traffic – most vehicle traffic likely has a destination in the immediate area, and much of the traffic is likely searching for parking opportunities.

Parking Impacts: Approximately 27 parking spaces are currently provided on the 100 block of King Street. Two of these spaces (in front of 108-110 King St.) are used as a loading zone from 8:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. Three spaces (in front of 100 King St.) are used as part of a valet parking service from 6:00 p.m. until 11:00 p.m.; the valet service will relocate as described later in this report.

Traffic Impacts: The Department of Transportation and Environmental Services measured vehicle traffic on the 100 block of King Street for two weekends in April, 2006 – starting at 8:00 a.m. on Friday mornings and continuing through Monday at 12:00 a.m. The traffic counts produced the following observations:

- (a) Average Hourly Vehicle Count: On an average weekend hour, the 100 block of King Street sees 283 vehicles (traveling both eastbound and westbound). This equates to 4.7 vehicles per minute or one vehicle every 13 seconds.
- (b) Peak Hourly Vehicle Count: Peak travel hours for all three weekend days occur in the early evenings – 7:00 p.m. on both Friday and Saturday and 5:00 p.m. on Sunday. At 7:00 p.m. on Saturday, the heaviest traffic hour, an average of 389 vehicles traveled on the 100 block. This equates to 6.5 vehicles per minute or one vehicle every 9 seconds.
- (c) Signage: The Department of Transportation and Environmental Services will place traffic control signage along with the barriers at the intersections with Union Street and Lee Street. To mitigate potential traffic and parking impacts, in addition to control signs the City will place directional signage at the intersection of King and Lee Streets directing drivers to nearby off-street parking.

VALET PARKING: As of this spring, the 100 King Restaurant on the southwest corner of King and Union Streets offers valet parking per a City administrative permit. Under normal

circumstances, this valet service occupies three spaces directly in front of the restaurant on the south side of King Street. A valet parking service can be a helpful element in reducing parking demand for the 100 block; however, because these spaces would be off limits to vehicles during a pedestrian plaza event, the valet service would need to be relocated to an appropriate nearby location.

ACTIVITIES: The atmosphere that is being sought is of a relaxed and casual plaza, and the activities envisioned for the plaza would reflect the desire to achieve such a subdued environment. Activities that would take place within the street and sidewalks of a pedestrian plaza would include outdoor dining from restaurants on the 100 block, activities sponsored by Alexandria-based organizations such as The Art League, and a limited number of other non-retail activities sponsored by Alexandria businesses. The pedestrian plaza would also include subdued, non-amplified musical and/or theatric accompaniment that would be in keeping with Old Town's character.

While there will be entertainment and outdoor dining, In order to ensure a pedestrian plaza of high quality befitting Old Town, there would be no retail activities on the pedestrian plaza.

Details of the proposed outdoor activities are as follows:

- (a) **Outdoor Dining:** The six restaurants on the 100 block of King Street that currently offer outdoor dining would continue to do so during pedestrian plaza weekends. We propose that during the first two weeks of the trial program, outdoor dining areas would remain in their current locations. For the following two weekends, restaurants could place their existing number of approved outdoor dining seats in the roadway, within eight feet of the curb. This alternate location may provide for additional visual appeal and would afford more pedestrian space on the sidewalks. Using both sidewalk and roadway outdoor dining arrangements will enable the City to determine if there is an optimal set-up for pedestrian plaza outdoor dining. In all cases, the total of number of outdoor seats that a restaurant may offer during a pedestrian plaza event may not exceed the existing number of outdoor seats permitted via an existing outdoor dining permit.
- (b) **Non-Amplified Accompaniment:** In order to add a unique element to a pedestrian plaza event in keeping with Old Town's character, staff proposes the inclusion of subdued musical and/or theatric accompaniment. This accompaniment will consist of musicians and performers with whom the City already has an established business relationship. The details of activity are being worked out by City staff.
- (c) **Other Non-Retail Activities:** Non-retail activities, particularly by Old Town based organizations or businesses would be encouraged in limited levels and for temporary durations during any given weekend. For example, The Art League is interested in participating somehow with art events (demonstrations, etc.) and some other businesses may be interested in participating with other types of non-retail activities. A KSMET-led subcommittee consisting of businesses and residents will be working on this activity.

The Police Department will provide off-duty officers or parking enforcement officers to address traffic and other issues that may arise during the four weekends of the pilot program.

FOLLOW UP:

As stated earlier, the program would be considered a success if it is regarded as beneficial to both residents and businesses. During and following the completion of the trial program, the City will gather information and opinions from residents, businesses and users as to the benefits and drawbacks of the program and will use this information in determining the course of future activities in this regard. We will return to Council in the fall with a recommendation on future street closings in the 100 block.

FISCAL IMPACT: City cost for a pedestrian plaza trial program would largely consist of the cost of paying for off-duty police officers, parking enforcement officers and honoraria to the performers scheduled to accompany the pedestrian plaza. For the four pilot weekends staff efforts will be handled by reallocating some existing staff time in various city departments. However, there will be some out of pocket costs for paying for performers which is the primary reason the \$10,000 allocation from FY 2006 council budget is proposed. Other costs borne by the City will be minimal, as the City is using existing inventories of barriers and utilizing the resources of KSMET and the local business community for other costs. The City will use barriers that are already in inventory and there would be minimal material costs associated with a trial program. Most furniture and other improvements would be supplied by local businesses or the KSMET business organization.

ATTACHMENTS:

- Attachment 1. Example of movable barriers
- Attachment 2. Illustration of pedestrian plaza

STAFF:

Eileen Fogarty, Director, Planning and Zoning
Eric Forman, Urban Planner, Planning and Zoning

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MEMORANDUM

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6-13-06

DATE: JUNE 12, 2006

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER 

SUBJECT: CONSIDERATION OF A PROPOSAL TO HAVE A TRIAL PROGRAM FOR A WEEKEND PEDESTRIAN PLAZA IN THE 100 BLOCK OF KING STREET

For your information, based on a meeting with staff today and the fact that the first proposed weekend of closure (Friday, June 16 through Sunday, June 18) is the same weekend as the Alexandria Waterfront Festival at Oronoco Bay Park, we recommend that the closure of the 100 block be deferred for one week to the weekend of Friday, June 23 through Sunday, June 25.

Staff is working to finalize the details of the closure and will be notifying the business and residential community about the four week pilot program if Council determines it wishes to go forward with the program.

We believe this is a great opportunity to test the weekend block closure, evaluate the results and return to Council with a recommendation in the fall on whether or not to make this program permanent.