

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: JUNE 4, 2007

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER *J*

SUBJECT: EVALUATION OF THE SECOND TRIAL PROGRAM FOR THE WEEKEND PEDESTRIAN PLAZA IN THE 100 BLOCK OF KING STREET

ISSUE: Evaluation of the second trial program for the weekend pedestrian plaza in the 100 block of King Street.

RECOMMENDATIONS: That City Council keep the 100 block of King Street open on weekends on a regular basis.

BACKGROUND: On June 13, 2006, Council approved a trial program restricting the 100 block of King Street to pedestrians for four weekends in June and July of 2006. The objective of the pedestrian plaza concept was to provide a unique space in Old Town for the enjoyment of local residents and visitors, and to enhance the business climate for local merchants. The trial program included low-key entertainment, some expanded outdoor dining, and a festive atmosphere of flowering plants, benches and flags. Council stated that the measure of success for the pedestrian plaza would be if the program was judged beneficial to residents, business and users. City Staff surveyed each of these constituencies during the pedestrian plaza weekends, and the survey results were for the most part, but not universally, positive. While pedestrian users of the plaza supported it, the view from the merchants was mixed. Some of the merchants reported a drop in sales, and no merchant reported a significant increase in retail sales in either the 100 or the 200 block of King Street. As a result, staff believed that the four summer pilot weekends were not a representative sample and recommended that the trial program continue in the 100 block of King Street for an additional eight weekends beginning on September 15, 2006, and continued until November 3, 2006, in order for staff to further evaluate the effectiveness of the program. This second trial program was approved by Council on September 12, 2006.

DISCUSSION: Each weekend from September 15, 2006, through November 3, 2006, the 100 block of King Street was closed to vehicular traffic beginning at 3:00 p.m. on Friday and continued closed through Monday morning at 6:00 a.m. Flags, plants and benches were used to provide ambiance, and occasional street musicians, clowns and jugglers provided entertainment, and many people participated in the outdoor dining offered by the restaurants.

In an effort to determine the feasibility of continuing to offer a pedestrian plaza, staff conducted surveys of both the business and the pedestrians, compared October 2005 and 2006 tax revenue, and measured costs to provide the program.

Based on the results of pedestrian and business surveys (Attachments 1 and 2), and costs associated with offering a pedestrian plaza in this format (Attachment 3), staff recommends that the City not close the 100 block of King Street for a weekend pedestrian plaza. However, in the long-term, it is recommended that special events be considered which may entail a one-day or one weekend closing of a block of King Street (the 100 block, or other blocks of King Street between the Potomac River and the King Street Metrorail Station). Also, the Waterfront Study will entail reviewing how to program and use the public spaces on the City's properties south of King Street along the waterfront. Such programming and use would bring many of the same benefits that the closing of the 100 block of King Street would bring, with fewer negative impacts.

During the fall 2006 trial program, a pedestrian survey was conducted on the King Street Plaza. Of the 547 pedestrian surveys surveyed, 97% liked the plaza, with approximately 60% suggesting it occur on regular basis. Of the 547 pedestrian surveys collected, 36% of the respondents were City residents, and 64% were non-residents. The Old Town Civic Association (OTCA) surveyed its membership and received about 72 responses. Of those responding, 47 (77%) of the respondents thought the pedestrian plaza should be made permanent, with 7 respondents (11%) indicating that the plaza should not be made permanent, and 7 respondents (11%) indicating no opinion. In regard to the plaza creating traffic issues, 14 (19%) of those surveyed by OTCA indicated that the plaza did create traffic problems, with 51 (71%) indicating no traffic problems, and 7 (10%) having no opinion.

With regard to the business community, 42 businesses in the lower King Street area were surveyed. Of those responding, 18 (43%) of the businesses strongly supported or supported the pedestrian plaza, and 18 (43%) of the businesses were strongly against or against the plaza. Six (14%) businesses were neutral. While the results show that the merchants were split on their support of the plaza concept, only one business indicated an increase in revenue, 18 businesses indicated there was no impact on revenues, and 13 indicated a loss in revenues.

With regard to local sales tax in the 100 and 200 blocks of King Street, based on tax data for October, 2006 (the one full month of the plaza operation), meals tax increased 14%, and the retail sales tax decreased 28% compared to October, 2005. It is difficult to determine if these results were associated with the pedestrian plaza or other outside influences. However, this retail sales tax decrease is consistent with the merchant survey where many retailers reported a drop in sales. It is also consistent with the experience of street conversions into pedestrian malls across the U.S. in the 1970's and 1980's, where a significant number of these conversions resulted in a drop in retail store sales. A significant number of these localities, when faced with declining retail sales, eliminated the pedestrian mall and reopened the street. In the national reports on pedestrian mall experiments, it is reported that the cutting off of automobile access by the creation of the pedestrian mall in lieu of a street used by vehicles (1) makes parking more difficult and that depresses retail sales, and (2) makes retailers on pedestrian malls less visible to vehicular traffic and with far fewer "eyeball" counts passing storefronts, retail sales suffer.

City costs for the eight weekends totaled \$15,505 and included security, street closures, staff coverage and plants (Attachment 3).

It is also important to note that there are no merchants or business organizations such as the Old Town Business and Professional Association strongly advocating the continuation of the pedestrian plaza in its trial format. Either businesses wanted a livelier and better landscaped pedestrian plaza, or they did not want a pedestrian plaza. Staff believes that by working over the long term with the business community, and developing more ideas, a concept (which would entail a street closing but only for special events such as the prior Hard Times Café Music Festival, or the Festival of the Arts) could be developed to determine an approach to scheduling more programs that would attract people to the City's historic resources, waterfront area, shops, restaurants and parks.

During the coming year, staff will continue to explore "event" opportunities in order to make the King Street corridor more vibrant and festive. With the Council requested planned study of Special Events Funding by BFAAC, and rethinking the City's Special Events Funding policies over the coming months, there will be an opportunity to consider temporary new street closings for special events as a way of revamping those events. Also, as the City undertakes the Waterfront Study in the fall, how the waterfront is improved and enhanced (especially at the foot of King Street) in order to better accommodate City residents and non-resident visitors will need to be studied. This is timely as National Harbor with its planned events and festivals will become a major new potential competitor for restaurant and retail dollars, as well as the guests of its 4,000 hotel rooms are a potential new clientele for the City to draw.

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment 1: Results of the Pedestrian Survey of the Second Trial Pedestrian Plaza (Sept. 15 - Nov. 3)

Attachment 2: Results of the Business Community Survey of the Second Trial Pedestrian Plaza (Sept. 15 - Nov.3)

Attachment 3: Costs Associated with both Pedestrian Plaza Trial Program

STAFF:

Mark Jinks, Deputy City Manager

Kirk Kincannon, Director, Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities

Janet Barnett, Deputy Director, Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities

Jim Mackay, Acting Director, Historic Alexandria

Richard Josephson, Deputy Director, Department of Planning and Zoning

Jack Browand, Division Chief, Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities

Kathleen Beeton, Division Chief, Department of Planning and Zoning

Tom Fairchild, Business Facilitator, City Manager's Office

Members, Special Events Committee

**Results of the Pedestrian Survey of the Second Trial Pedestrian Plaza
(Sept. 15 - Nov. 3)**

Total Respondents: 547

Where do you live?

City of Alexandria	197
Arlington	33
Fairfax City/County	133
Prince Georges County	7
Prince William County	21
Other	156

Are you here primarily to:

Shop	76
Dine in a restaurant	151
Entertainment	91
Walk around	63
See the sights	33
Other	156

Do you like having the 100 block as a pedestrian only street on weekends?

Yes	192	No	6
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How did you get to Old Town today?

Walked	105
Biked	2
Bus	1
Drove	102
Metro	2
Other	2

If you drove, where did you park?

On the street	71	In a garage	25	In a lot	7
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Would this pedestrian-only 100 Block of King Street cause you to visit Old Town:

More	164	Less	4	About the same	44
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Would you like to see this pedestrian-only, 100 Block of King Street:

Made permanent on weekends	116
Made permanent 365 days a year	86
Not Permanent	9

Do you have any suggestions for changes to a pedestrian plaza along King Street? If so, please suggest specific amenities you would like to see:

Benches/Tables	113
Planters/Flowers	74
Retail/Food Vendors	48
Public Art	91
Less Restaurant Seating	8
More Entertainment	95
More Restaurant Seating	86

**Results of the Business Community Survey of the Second Trial Pedestrian Plaza
(Sept. 15 - Nov.3)**

Business in the 100 and 200 Blocks were Surveyed to provide their comments on the following and to provide remarks:

SUPPORT	SALES IMPACT	ATTRIBUTES (comments related to a topic)
Strongly Support 8	Improve \$ 1	Bench Tables 8
Support 10	No \$ Impact 18	Planters Flowers 12
Neutral 6	Hurt \$ 13	Public Art 10
Against 7		Entertainers 17
Strongly Against 11		Enlarge Zone 5

REMARKS	
Loss of parking - detour of customers around plaza were both problems	increased foot traffic - should extend to the 200-block
make plaza more inviting - move dining to the street	program did not encourage retail, but rather people watching, etc.
Permanent closure during season - move dining to the street	The idea in general is appealing - but should be extended to 200-blk
Customer comments are very favorable	This program absolutely should not be continued!
Customer comments are very favorable	More foot traffic = more business - extend to the waterfront!
Wants more consistent closing - better use of street interesting & innovative - the public seemed to enjoy!	Customer response very good! Improve street activity (dining?), appearance (pavers?) and scheduled entertainment. Status quo not working
Overall concept is good - needs improvement!	More entertainment required, but the benches and flowers were nice!
Either do it right (and I support), or don't do it at all	This like other City programs are worthless - NEED PARKING!
Very bad for business!	Loss of parking makes program a loser. Resurface or clean street!
lack of parking kept customers away	It needs to look more inviting, but the overall idea is good.
if continues, more security should be provided.	The plaza is great - gathering place! Info kiosks, better promotions needed.
Don't do it again!	Plaza was aesthetically pleasing and should be cont'd in the same way.
more foot traffic - not more paying customers	Loss of parking makes program a loser.
It possibly hurts business, but if done, it needs more creativity	Beautiful plants and extra benches were great!
Was devastating to business - do not continue this program	City should provide free parking
Loss of parking, but more foot traffic - business improved over time	Energy was good - figure a way that retailers can directly participate!
Program was horrible for business - more trash, less parking	if program must continue, please extend to the 200-block
It attracts the wrong element - and not our shoppers!	Quite a loss of business - lack of parking, etc. kept our customers away
It was a carnival atmosphere that did serious damage to our business.	Bad impact on business
increased foot traffic - move dining to street, open sidewalks	

Costs Associated with both Pedestrian Plaza Trial Programs

Pedestrian Plaza Trial Program 2 - Weekends, Friday, September 15 - Sunday, November 3

Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities (Staff costs related to streetscaping and monitoring activities)	\$ 6,350
Public Safety (Staff costs related to officers monitoring traffic and safety)	\$ 5,000
T&ES (Staff costs related to sign posting and traffic barrier placement)	\$ 4,155
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Total Costs (8 weeks)	\$15,505

Pedestrian Plaza Trial Program 1 - Weekends, Friday, June 23 - Sunday, July 16

Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities (Entertainment and staff costs related to streetscaping)	\$ 8,200
Public Safety (Staff costs related to officers monitoring traffic and safety)	\$ 5,000
T&ES (Staff costs related to sign posting and traffic barrier placement)	\$ 4,000
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Total Costs (4 weeks)	\$17,300