

## Bethesda Urban Partnership

### INNOVATION

When COVID-19 swiftly changed operations at local restaurants, the Bethesda Urban Partnership (BUP) created the Bethesda Streeterly as an economic development lifeline and opened The Streeterly in a timely manner. The outdoor eatery was the logical answer for the struggling restaurants that had a massive drop in business due to the decrease or elimination of in-restaurant dining. The Streeterly provided the needed outdoor seating when restaurants could no longer operate at the same capacity. With nearly 200 downtown restaurants, BUP needed to lend a helping hand to all businesses, not just those located within the street closure. Therefore, the eatery was designed to assist all businesses and rather than having tables reserved for specific restaurants, it was set up as open seating. People were invited to bring food or drinks, including alcohol, from any downtown Bethesda restaurant.

When live entertainment was once again permitted by the county, acoustic sets were scheduled for weekend evenings. The addition of music was a terrific attraction for patrons and provided an opportunity to support local musicians. In addition to restaurants receiving support, the Streeterly motivated economic activity across the downtown by encouraging the community to venture out for shopping and dining. The safe and cheerful atmosphere of the Streeterly was a welcome "taste" of normalcy for many members of the community during a difficult year. Additionally, a sense of place and new opportunity for converting five blocks of public streets into a new placemaking program has grown out of the Streeterly.

### OUTCOME

The Bethesda Streeterly had a ripple effect across the community. First dreamt up as a solution to help struggling restaurants during the pandemic, the open-air eatery became a place of connection for all members of the downtown. With tables positioned at a safe distance, surfaces kept clean and mask requirements clearly posted, visitors had a safe place to visit for an excursion outside of the home as they began to re-visit the downtown. Amidst mounting public health restrictions in early 2020, plans for the Streeterly quickly came together and it opened June 2020. Popularity for the closed streets grew fast. Not only were business owners pleased by the economic boost from the increased foot traffic, but downtown residents, visitors and businesses frequently commented about the vibrancy of the open-air dining concept. The Streeterly was frequently filled to capacity during dinnertime and in the evenings this past summer and fall.

In December 2020 the Streeterly was winterized. In accordance with public safety and health guidelines, tents and heaters were added. The winterization became increasingly necessary when restaurants were restricted from allowing indoor dining. Overall, the favorable feedback has been overwhelming and many groups have requested that the Streeterly become permanent. Thanks to the outpouring of support, progress is underway to solidify the Bethesda Streeterly as a permanent placemaking initiative and transform two of the closed streets into a pedestrian street complete with seating and dining areas, entertainment and shaded areas as well.

### EXECUTION

COVID-19 created an urgent need for economic support of local businesses and the nearly 200 restaurants in our downtown, therefore the Bethesda Streeterly was quickly developed. Bethesda Urban Partnership started the project in April 2020 and opened the Streeterly on June 10, 2020. BUP worked with the county government, including the Department of Transportation, to close streets. The streets selected for closures were chosen purposefully for easy detour routes as well as visibility and accessibility for restaurant owners and patrons. The Department of Liquor Control granted permits for open containers within the closures, expanding the footprint where customers could drink alcohol purchased from local businesses. The police department was briefed and could provide a quick security detail if necessary. Tables and chairs were rented from a trusted, local equipment company and signage was designed and printed. Business owners were notified and the team conducted press outreach. In just over two months, thanks to fast, quality teamwork, the safely-designed Streeterly was open, helping businesses and receiving rave reviews from visitors who wanted it to become permanent. The Streeterly continued to change with the seasons. BUP purchased and provided heaters in the fall and in December heated tents were added.

## **REPRESENTATION**

Bethesda Urban Partnership created, implemented and manages The Streeterly operations, but the project also required the support of others. It was designed to help all community members – local businesses, Bethesda residents and downtown visitors. The open-seating concept made the set-up accessible for anyone who wanted to dine in the downtown and the press coverage by several news outlets shared the Streeterly's open invitation with the wider Washington, D.C. Metro Area audience.

Implementation was made possible thanks to the help and support of additional groups including local business owners, county government and a corporate partner/property owner. The county departments gave approval for necessary permits including road closures, tent structures and open container permits. And when BUP needed to winterize the Streeterly, Montgomery County Government provided appropriation funding to pay for the heated tents. It was a successful team effort for a project that benefited all parties in Bethesda's downtown.

## **REPLICATION**

The immediate need of the Streeterly during the pandemic pushed Bethesda Urban Partnership to create pedestrian streets that were an economic and social boost for the downtown. There are hidden opportunities for pedestrian streets in many downtowns. The locations may not appear obvious and would require traffic changes, but the benefit is immeasurable. The Bethesda Streeterly not only helped businesses, but also elevated the atmosphere of the downtown as the expanded outdoor dining experience energized the neighborhood and provided a new placemaking environment in our downtown. Gathering for dinner, happy hour, a coffee date, a temporary outdoor office and more are all provided by the Bethesda Streeterly.

Thanks to the support and excitement from the community, what began as a temporary fix in Bethesda, is now on the path to becoming permanent. Downtowns that are interested in adopting a pedestrian street could create a trial period, closing a street(s) for a limited time as a test-run. If a permanent pedestrian street isn't feasible, creating special nights when "Main Street" becomes a promenade could draw an audience interested in a new experience in their downtown.

## **COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY**

The need for the Streeterly in 2020 was obvious, which made garnering support for the project simple. With the support from Montgomery County, local businesses and community partners, the Bethesda Urban Partnership was able to easily obtain necessary permits and supplies to help set-up the open-air eatery. Centralizing operations within the BUP team streamlined the project.

Because many of our special events and community festivals could not be held in 2020 due to Covid restrictions, we had a budget to start and implement the program, and with additional support from Montgomery County, we were able to winterize the Streeterly by adding heated tents and lighting from December through March 2021. With BUP managing all operations including equipment inventory and set-up, trash removal, table disinfection, messaging, press and more, the project has been running seamlessly. BUP staff filled the roles needed to run the Streeterly. Additionally, designing the concept as open-seating allowed for flexibility and fairness. Rather than reserving tables within the Streeterly for specific establishments, it provided equal, additional space for all businesses. It wasn't designed for any one group or business, but for all patrons and restaurants to have equal access.