

Downtown San Diego Partnership

INNOVATION

The Curbside San Diego initiative created a framework for developing solutions to respond to the immediate needs of businesses in our community while also setting the groundwork for long-term transformation of downtown's public realm. At the launch of the initiative, the Downtown Partnership identified six locations in downtown where the public right-of-way could be made available for outdoor dining and physical distancing. The proposed pilot locations varied in their typology, from multi-block full street closures to designating one parking space for curbside pick-up. The purpose was to test various concepts and develop a program that was tailored to the specific location needs.

As the Curbside San Diego program evolved, the Downtown Partnership partnered with a local architect to design a modular dining platform that would be a flexible, affordable and attractive option for businesses to install. The program, dubbed Curbside Module, provides standard architectural plans for a modular 9' x 18' dining platform that could be constructed for approximately \$5,000. The modules are being installed at three pilot locations during an initial pilot. The Downtown Partnership has also developed a public parklet program through Curbside San Diego that will bring two new public pedestrian spaces to the City Center business district and the Columbia District.

Curbside San Diego was born out of this crisis but is now a permanent initiative of the Downtown Partnership that will help in facilitating downtown's economic recovery and the creation of more people-friendly spaces.

OUTCOME

Using recommendations provided by the Downtown Partnership, the City of San Diego enacted several new emergency regulations to allow expanded business operations within the public right-of-way. The Downtown Partnership also hosted two webinars to educate business owners about the new regulations. With the new emergency regulations in place, the Downtown Partnership and other business districts in the city could apply for permits to close sections of streets along business corridors, allowing restaurants and other ground floor businesses to use designated areas within the street.

As of March 1, 2021, over 100 businesses in downtown have benefited from the Curbside San Diego program and the city's Temporary Outdoor Business Operations (TOBO) permit. Over 25 businesses participated in the Curbside Gaslamp and Curbside Columbia temporary street closures in 2020. In the first month of the Curbside Columbia launch, businesses reported a 25 percent increase in sales on the days the outdoor seating was available, compared to their sales prior to the installation. With the city's update to the TOBO permit in early 2021 to allow for dining platforms, over 35 businesses are now using platforms for outdoor operations.

EXECUTION

The Downtown Partnership was able to assess our current projects to identify opportunities to address the impacts of the emergency. Cortez Mobility, a project that involved implementing low-cost mobility improvements in the Cortez neighborhood, was quickly pivoted to develop solutions to assist businesses with adopting COVID-19 health guidelines. This resulted in the first Curbside San Diego project adjacent to a popular café. Using sidewalk decals, signage and tape, a new curbside pick-up zone and playful physical distancing reminders were installed in a matter of days. The pilot was one of the first examples of how businesses could remain open while keeping the public safe.

With the City's emergency regulations, businesses are able to use the public right-of-way for outdoor business operations through the duration of Governor Newsom's State of Emergency Declaration. Using the Curbside Module pilot project, the Downtown Partnership is actively advocating for the creation of permanent regulations that would allow businesses to establish dining platforms within the parking lane. The Downtown Partnership is also developing two permanent public parklets in the City Center and Columbia District neighborhoods under the Curbside San Diego program. Together these projects will create more vibrant and pedestrian oriented streets in Downtown San Diego.

REPRESENTATION

Prior to the release of the open letter to the Mayor outlining potential elements of the Curbside San Diego initiative, the Downtown Partnership had engaged small businesses and began conversations with the City of San Diego and other community organizations on finding solutions to the impacts caused by the pandemic-induced closures. Those conversations resulted in 12 community organizations coming together to propose the Curbside San Diego initiative. As the initiative gained momentum and support, the Downtown Partnership engaged additional partners such as U.S Bank and OBR Architecture to implement programs under Curbside San Diego. And throughout 2020 we relied on our relationships with our diverse small business community to inform the evolving response of Curbside San Diego. This collaborative effort allowed the Downtown Partnership to successfully take the Curbside San Diego initiative from an idea to reality, where places once dominated by the automobile are now places of economic activity and social interaction during at time of great tragedy and stress.

REPLICATION

Curbside San Diego is more than a program, it is an idea to propel transformation of downtown San Diego's public realm. At the heart of the program is testing ideas to find optimal solutions with the understanding that not all ideas will work. This concept can easily be adopted by other place management organizations. The success of the program is a result of collaboration across business organizations, small businesses, and government agencies, all having a shared understanding of the program's goal.

Flexibility and creativity in pooling together funding sources was pivotal to the program's success. The Downtown Partnership was able to pivot the focus of existing projects, leverage existing relationships for financial support, and identify alternate sources of funding to implement the various Curbside San Diego programs.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

While the pandemic induced health restrictions severely impacted the economic health of Downtown San Diego, the sense of urgency felt by community organizations, the business community and government agencies enabled "out of the box" thinking and problem solving to occur in a rapid fashion. Although there were various projects and programs that fell under the Curbside San Diego umbrella, each with their own challenges, the key to the program's ongoing success is the focus on the intended outcome: transforming downtown San Diego's public realm into a more vibrant people-focused place.

Tying the various programs and projects into a singular Curbside San Diego brand ensured consistent marketing of the temporary outdoor dining program across the multiple business districts within downtown. The Downtown Partnership created a Curbside San Diego webpage where businesses could access resources available to small businesses such as permitting info, grants, and health guidelines.