

West Palm Beach Downtown Development Authority

INNOVATION

The project purpose was to create a streamlined process for permitting emergency outdoor dining spaces for businesses to continue operating during the pandemic in a socially distant environment. The DDAs had already conducted a Temporary Use Permitting (TUP) Study that helped create a working group, who moved quickly to implement the Dining on the Spot program.

The desired outcome focused on helping local businesses expand into outdoor spaces, making the DOTS sites become a natural billboard to indicate that places were back in business and ready for curbside pickup and outdoor dining options. The program also served to provide additional capacity to the businesses in a creative manner, while encouraging people to come outside and engage responsibly through DOTS.

- The program offered a unique approach to a downtown management challenge, which was the following:
- Cross-departmental and cross-governmental approach to producing a streamlined permitting process to an executive order for outdoor dining.
- Suspension of permitting fees during the first six months.
- DDA design and permitting support to initiate the use of the spaces by private sector businesses, which included a transitional plan for the sustainability and longevity of the program beyond the allotted time.
- DDA creating a baseline of urban typologies that would satisfy city urban design requirements and cut costs down for private sector when transferring the spaces to private sector by building a kit of parts.
- The city modifying and amending their existing ordinances as a long-term solution to outdoor dining by implementing results from Dining on the Spot.

OUTCOME

The program's impact was visible as the number of restaurants that were able to maintain their open operations surpassed those that had to close their doors. During the program we also saw new businesses open, which was an indicator that we were headed in the right direction with outdoor expansion plans.

The DOTS program measured results by recruiting 15 volunteers to evaluate how people were using these newly conceived spaces by using a beta version app developed by Gehl Architects. Gehl's observational research method enabled evaluation and adjustment of the DOTS program according to how people were using the outdoor dining space. This allowed the DDA to stay true to their method of deploying placemaking projects that test, measure, and adapt to real-time data, creating informed solutions for the future. The observational research was conducted from May 15 to June 27, finding 61,104 pedestrian and 33,195 stationary counts in total.

The DOTS program served as a pilot test for the Temporary Use Permitting (TUP) process which was initially developed with the working group prior to COVID-19, but also revealed the limitations for permitting these temporary uses with Right of Way and Special Events permits. The pressure imposed by COVID-19 restrictions accelerated this process into action. This brought attention to solving the issue of permitting temporary projects as well as making the sidewalk café seating and parklet ordinances have a more user-friendly process. The program has been operating for 10 months which surpassed the initial six months supported through the DDA.

EXECUTION

When Palm Beach County initiated Phase I reopening, the DDA with the city's assistance, launched the DOTS Program for outdoor dining on parklets, sidewalks, alleyways, and parking lots centered along the downtown district's core. DOTS uses open spaces, both public and private, for the temporary use to extend the interiors of the businesses that were mandated to operate at a fraction

of their maximum occupancy.

Without a TUP process, the DDA was limited to Right of Way and Special Events permits to implement the DOTS program. Tests were run for one week, in coordination with TUP working group members and provided enough information to create the executive order for the DOTS application permit process, which established guidelines for both private and public sector entities to expand dining onto the various types of urban sites that were conceived during the testing period. All applicants were required to obtain liability insurance, meet the strict guidelines and were subject to police enforcement. The DDA assigned COVID-19 emergency funding to subsidize equipment rental costs, such as tables, chairs, umbrellas, and tents to support the initial outdoor dining expansion for the local businesses which had been negatively affected financially by the pandemic.

REPRESENTATION

Our downtown business composition is diverse, showcasing the cross-section of cultures and different backgrounds in the area. With over 90 restaurant business storefronts in the DDA district, all were all allowed to apply for the program. Due to the pandemic many places remained closed for various months and the program worked in an incremental manner. All businesses were given the same opportunity of free permitting and free rental prior to the transition after exhausting the DDA's budget in six months; no matter when they reopened during that time period.

Another level of equity was supplying smaller businesses with additional support through other financial efforts run by the DDA, which matched the Knight Foundation grant of \$25,000, providing local non-profit group 1909, an entrepreneur hub, the means to operate Project 1909. Launched a few months after DOTS, the grant provided technology-based solutions for small businesses who normally could not afford this. The program solved the generational gap of businesses that have been traditionally brick and mortar by launching them into the 21st century world of online retail.

REPLICATION

The city is now looking to expand on the streamlined permitting process for temporary projects and programs like this one exploring the potential of a Temporary Use Permit.

The collective work of the city, the DDA, and the merchants have been key to creating a long-term outdoor dining solution informed by the short-term experimental DOTS program.

The city is currently making changes to the existing parklet and café seating permitting, reflecting the lessons learned from the DOTS program.

The DDA, along with Gehl Architects and Dover Kohl's planning group, is supporting these changes by putting together a visual guidebook that makes the permitting process easy to understand and provides the urban typologies already approved by the city through the DOTS program. This guidebook will be an open-source document available for anyone to download.

DOTS was created as a prototype that is easy to replicate in other parts of the city and beyond, as it operates as a kit of parts for outdoor urban planning solutions.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

The project was very complex, due to the uncertainty of COVID-19 restrictions, sudden changes in business management, and the constant instability of a world that is waiting to re-open and go back to "normal" but never does. The main strategies to mitigate the complexity of a project managing 45 different businesses spread through 12 city blocks that had rentals start dates in several waves were twofold: these included maintaining an active level of communication with businesses, and re-evaluation of sites by coordinated site visits. Conducting the observational research was key to understand which sites were working and which were not. Once the team identified something that was not working, immediate action was taken to call the business owner to see what needed to change in the design or any other types of support.

Once the spaces were operational, it was also found that businesses began to feel a sense of ownership over the bistro tables and umbrellas. This level of maintenance provided a decentralized solution, which made the program more cost effective. Hiring a rental company was also key to the upkeep of any damaged equipment. The businesses would clean and maintain the equipment by taking down umbrellas during stormy days.