



CITY OF SAN MATEO

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Agenda Report

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TO: City Council
FROM: Drew Corbett, City Manager
PREPARED BY: City Manager's Office
MEETING DATE: May 17, 2021
SUBJECT:
Consideration of Long-Term Downtown Street Closures

RECOMMENDATION:

Provide guidance on options for continuing the street closures on segments of B Street between Baldwin Avenue and 3rd Avenue after the end of the pandemic.

BACKGROUND:

City Council has prioritized exploring potential street closures in Downtown San Mateo in the Strategic Plan for the past two years. In June 2020, City Council approved the temporary closure of portions of B Street between Baldwin Avenue and 3rd Avenue to allow for outdoor dining and other outdoor business uses during the pandemic. In February 2021, City Council voted to extend the temporary closures through September 30, 2021 due to the continuing pandemic and directed staff to return for a more in-depth discussion of a potential seasonal or permanent closure of the streets after the end of the pandemic. This report provides information on the process for moving forward with a long-term street closure and several decision points for City Council review and direction.

Temporary Street Closures

The temporary street closures consist of 3 separate segments, the full block of B Street between 1st and 2nd Avenues, the full block of B Street between 2nd and 3rd Avenues, and the southbound lane of B Street between Baldwin and 1st Avenue. Through traffic can still travel east-west on 1st, 2nd and 3rd Avenues between each segment of the street closures. In addition, garbage and delivery trucks are allowed access the center of the closed street segments in the mornings prior to 10 a.m. The City had originally considered closing both lanes on B Street between Baldwin and 1st Avenues but limited the closure to one lane to allow for continued access to a private driveway and parking lot used by businesses on the northbound side of the street at their request.

The City is currently using water-filled barricades to cordon off the street and has placed detour signs throughout the Downtown to direct traffic. Staff marked out a 10-foot wide center lane with temporary tape to allow for emergency and other vehicle access on the closed segments. The center lane has moveable water barricades that can be manually opened to allow for limited vehicle access during morning hours. The temporary street closures result in a loss of 67 on-street parking spaces: 6 spaces between Baldwin and 1st Avenue, 31 spaces between 1st and 2nd Avenues, and 30 spaces between 2nd and 3rd Avenues.

The businesses located along the closed segments of the street are permitted to use the area in front of their business up to the marked center lane. At the start of the pandemic, the restaurants limited their use to only tables, chairs, and umbrellas. During the fall, many restaurants built out fences and tents around their area and a few beyond their frontage to weatherize it and to customize the decor. Some businesses also constructed platforms to create a level dining surface due to B Street having a very high crown in the center which creates a significant slope in the street, especially adjacent to

the curb.

The City has not experienced any major issues as a result of the temporary closures. There have been occasional complaints from residents and businesses about decreased on-street parking and ability to access the restaurants for take-out, but these have been balanced by positive feedback from the community on the increased vitality in the Downtown. Although there have not been any traffic accidents as result of the closures, staff has witnessed cars travelling in the wrong direction in the open one-way travel lane on B Street between Baldwin and 1st Avenue. Recology has had some difficulty providing garbage service, even with the center lane being available, due to concerns with potentially damaging the built structures and has had to manually walk the carts on each of the street segments to their collection trucks.

Survey Results

To obtain feedback on the proposed long-term street closures, staff put out two separate surveys: one to the community at large and one to the businesses located along the closed segments to understand the impact on their operations and revenue. The community survey also contained some questions related to the recent City Council discussion about possible zoning changes in the Downtown. Those responses are not analyzed as part of this report. The community survey was posted on the City's Speak Up San Mateo platform and was advertised through our community e-newsletter and social media. The survey was open for roughly 4 weeks and received 738 responses. The results of the survey are provided as Attachment 1.

The majority of respondents to the community survey were residents of San Mateo and most stated they visit the Downtown at least once a week. The response to the potential street closures was very favorable: 57% of respondents said they would visit the Downtown more frequently if there were street closures in place and only 7.4% said they would visit less frequently. Other key take-aways were as follows:

- A year-round closure was strongly preferred to a seasonal closure.
- While a majority of respondents supported continuing the temporary closures on all segments, there was much stronger support for continuing the closure on the segments of B Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues than for continuing the one-lane closure between 1st Avenue and Baldwin.
- There was strong support for using the street closures for outdoor dining, pedestrian space, festivals and other special events, and a farmer's market.
- The primary concerns about the street closures centered around the loss of on-street parking and increasing walking distances for seniors or people with disabilities.

The business survey focused on the direct impacts to the businesses located on the street closures as well as their interest in a longer-term closure. A total of 36 out of the 42 businesses on the impacted streets responded to the survey. The full results of the business survey, as well as the results filtered by the location of the business and the type of business are included as Attachment 2.

The impacted businesses had a more mixed response to the potential long-term closure. The businesses were pretty split about whether the current street closures have been helpful or harmful to their businesses. The major concerns related to reduction in customer access, ease of getting deliveries of supplies, and access for third-party delivery companies. Businesses' support for a continued street closure varied depending on the street segment; 40% between Baldwin and 1st Avenue, 75% between 1st and 2nd Avenue, and 53% between 2nd and 3rd Avenues supported a continued closure. Businesses were split on whether they preferred a seasonal or year-round closure, although the responses also varied on the different street segments. Unsurprisingly, support for the continued street closure was higher among restaurants and cafes than it was among other business types.

Construction Costs

Staff from the Public Works Engineering Division analyzed the potential improvements needed for a long-term street closure. They looked at both short and long-term improvements for consideration. In the short term, although it is possible to keep the water barricades in place, they are not very attractive and have a temporary look and feel to them. Public

Works recommends replacing them with bollards and/or planter boxes. A gate or retractable bollard would be needed for the center of the street to allow for garbage and delivery truck access during allowed hours. Additionally, the traffic signals surrounding the street closure segments will need to be adjusted and retimed. Staff estimates these short-term improvements would cost roughly \$150,000 to \$200,000 per block segment. This expense is not currently budgeted in the City's Capital Improvement Program and will require an additional appropriation.

Longer term, staff recommends repaving the street to reduce the crown of the street and raise the street to make it flush with the sidewalks. This is much more costly improvement which would run roughly \$1.5 to \$2 million per block segment. This would be a permanent improvement and would be costly to reverse if the street were to be reopened in the future.

Considerations for Business Use of the Street

In addition to allowing for continued outdoor business use, the City may want to host special events on the closed street segments such as street festivals (like the September Nights on B Street) or allow third parties to host special events such as a weekly farmers' markets. These events would require use of the entire width of the street. As stated earlier in this report, many restaurants have built out fences, structures, and platforms to demarcate their outdoor dining areas. If businesses are allowed to have structures it would directly conflict with the space needed to host special events such as festivals and farmers' markets since these outdoor dining areas will be challenging to remove and store when the full width of the street is needed. As a result, staff recommends only allowing businesses to place moveable furniture such as tables, chairs, and umbrellas on the street. Some businesses have expressed concerns about this policy recommendation due to the investment they have made in their built structures and also due to the existing slope in the street which makes it hard to stabilize tables and have a level dining area.

Presently, the businesses along the street closure are not being charged for use of the right-of-way. If the street were closed long-term, staff recommends that they be required to get an annual Sidewalk Tables and Chairs Encroachment permit, which has an annual fee of \$371 and requires that the permit holder carry insurance. A final consideration is whether to allow businesses that are located at the corners of closed street segments to apply for parklets for the portion of their frontage along the intersecting street. Currently, there are several businesses along the closed segments that have parklets on intersecting streets. Staff recommends against allowing this to minimize the potential parking loss in the Downtown while encouraging use of the closed street. Currently, businesses with built structures have temporary permits that will terminate as of September 30, 2021.

Procedures for Long-Term Closure

The State has preempted the entire field of traffic control (Veh. Code Section 21). As a result, any right of local authority to make changes affecting traffic flow, such as closing a street, must be derived from an express delegation of authority from the State. The current street closures are authorized under the State Vehicle Code Section 21101(e), which allows for temporary street closures necessary for public safety. The City determined that this was needed during the pandemic to allow for outdoor dining during the time when indoor dining was limited or otherwise restricted.

In order to close the street but still allow for vehicular traffic as needed for emergency access, deliveries, and garbage service, the City would need to rely on the State Pedestrian Mall Act for authority for a longer-term closure of segments of B Street for pedestrian use (whether seasonally or year-round). The Pedestrian Mall Act outlines a formal process that the City must undertake to authorize the closure.

The first step in the process is the adoption of resolution of intent which sets a public hearing date for the consideration of the street closure. The public hearing date must be set for at least 90 days after the adoption of the resolution of intent. A notice of intent to close the street must be posted on the proposed street segments and mailed to all property owners abutting the street. Abutting property owners may submit objections and may also file a legal claim of damages and seek compensation if they believe the street closure will cause harm to their property. If the majority of the owners abutting the closure submit written objections, the City cannot move forward with the street closure. If any abutting property owners submit claims for damages prior to the public hearing, these claims must be resolved in court prior to the City establishing the street closure. If the property owners do not submit claims in advance of the public hearing, then they waive their right to submit any future claims.

Following the public hearing, the City would adopt an ordinance to establish the pedestrian mall and any related rules and regulations governing the use of the roadway (such as allowing vehicles during limited hours for deliveries). The City can amend the regulations and/or reopen the closed street by ordinance at any time in the future. The street closure for the purpose of a pedestrian mall is not considered to be a street vacation or abandonment of the right-of-way.

Questions for City Council consideration:

City Council direction is needed on the following items:

- 1) Do you wish to initiate the process for a long-term closure of segments of B Street to create a pedestrian mall?
- 2) If so, which segments of B Streets should be considered?
- 3) Do you prefer to have a seasonal (May through October) or year-round pedestrian mall?
- 4) Do you support not allowing businesses to have built platforms/structures on the pedestrian mall to facilitate the ability to hold public events?
- 5) Should businesses on the pedestrian mall be required to get a sidewalk dining encroachment permit for their use of the outdoor space?
- 6) Should businesses on the pedestrian mall located at the corners be prohibited from using parking spaces on the intersecting streets for parklet installations?

If the City Council supports moving forward with a long-term closure, staff will return to City Council in June with the initial Resolution of Intent to start the official public process.

BUDGET IMPACT:

A permanent street closure on B Street results in a reduction of parking meter revenue to the City. It is not possible to estimate the exact amount of the potential reduction in revenue.

ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINATION:

The City completed an Initial Study and Negative Declaration (IS/ND) evaluating the environmental impact of both a temporary street closure extension and a permanent street closure which was adopted on February 1, 2021. No potentially significant impacts on the environment were identified.

NOTICE PROVIDED

All meeting noticing requirements were met.

ATTACHMENTS

Att 1 – Community Survey Results
Att 2 – Business Survey Results
Att 3 – Public Comments

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