

COMMERCIAL DISTRICT DESIGN: COVID-19 RESPONSE AND MANAGEMENT

Parklets—also known as [curbside seating or street seats](#)—are sidewalk extensions that repurpose one or more parking spaces or lanes, often installed as curb-height platforms. They can offer space for [myriad uses](#), including additional seating, greenspace, or public art in commercial districts. **Pedlets** also extend the sidewalk as curb-height platforms, using one or more parking spaces, but they provide an alternative path for pedestrians to move down the street, while leaving the sidewalk space open for other walkers, or businesses’ use as seating and merchandising. Parklet program models are relatively easy to find due to the worldwide use and flexibility of the approach. Increasingly, small, rural towns are implementing parklet and pedlet programs, adding to a growing catalog of communities of all sizes from which to draw inspiration and guidance.



Benefits

As with the open streets concept discussed in [Brief #1](#), parklets and pedlets can offer community members and commercial districts multiple benefits, particularly regarding economic impact, health, and community building.

Economic Impact

- Expanded space for customer use, e.g. seating, sidewalk sales
- Increased foot and bike traffic and attraction of customers
- Opportunity for multi-business collaboration and shared revenue

Health

- Physically separated space from automobile traffic and other people
- Increased options for seating and places for rest
- Encouragement of walking, biking, and rolling

Community Building

- Expanded opportunities for social gathering
- Sense of social cohesion and ownership of public space
- Opportunity to create hyper-local amenities that reflect local interest and culture

A Brief History

The [parklet concept](#) came to the fore in 2005, when urban designers in San Francisco activated an underused, curbside parking space for use as a small park (while feeding the meter). The concept became a quick success, drawing the attention of the Trust for Public Land, who helped the originators (now known as ReBar) expand their [Park\(ing\) Day](#) concept into a worldwide event where designated curbside commercial district parking spaces are repurposed. The uses range widely, from bike parking spaces to parklets, outdoor classrooms to game rooms, and more.

In 2008, the City of San Francisco approached ReBar to create a prototype parklet for more long-term uses that would be sponsored by small businesses who could use the additional space for customers. Since the development of that prototype, the San Francisco Parklet Program has been adapted in 111 big cities and rural towns, in 32 states, and 20 countries.

Considerations for Success

No matter the location or community size, local leaders—such as representatives of state and local agencies, community advocates, and Main Street managers—interested in parklet programs for their communities should prioritize the following considerations:

- **Strive for inclusive community engagement.**

As with any public space project, local leaders should prioritize community engagement and intentionally seek out perspectives and input from community members living within and beyond the commercial district. Public engagement is the right thing to do as local leaders, and can help guide the most successful and welcoming use. In publicly managed parklets, be sure to continue that message of welcoming and engagement during and after parklet construction with signage proclaiming “All are welcome.”

- **Determine location and timeline.** Parklets and pedlets are generally relatively quick, easy, and inexpensive to install and remove, so there is more flexibility with their location and timeframe than with other public space interventions. Their location will depend on the local context, available space and willing partners, so local business and community engagement is key to identifying the ideal spot(s). Similarly, local leaders implementing parklet programs need to consider and seek input on the project’s timeframe—will it be a temporary installation or a permanent one? Will it be iterative, and change use or design over time, based on performance and feedback?



(c) Paul Krueger

A clear, unobtrusive sign lets people know that parklets are public space—as opposed to patios for business patrons only.

- **Build a cross-sector planning team.** As with open streets programs discussed in Brief #1, parklet and pedlet programs change the function of spaces adjacent to businesses and governed by different agencies and organizations, so it is essential that planners involve business owners, fellow community representatives, and the appropriate agencies (e.g. Departments of Transportation, Planning, Public Works, Parks and Recreation) in the decision making.

For parklets and pedlets adjacent to commercial spaces, local leaders should particularly engage business owners so that they 1) have a say in the parklet concept, 2) reap the parklet or pedlet’s benefits and 3) help manage the space (e.g. water the plants) once it is constructed.

And local leaders should be sure to include businesses or other stakeholders not adjacent to the parklet who may wish to donate materials, time, upkeep—or simply help to spread the word.

- **Address concerns over parking.** Because parklets and pedlets remove parking spaces from automobile use, local leaders will likely need to address concerns from community members and business owners who fear the loss of potential car-driving customers. Luckily, many cities, towns, and neighborhood associations have measured the economic and community building impacts of parking versus parklets and have generally found that 1) parklets attract more customers on foot than would have used the parking space and 2) customers on foot tend to spend more time in the district and return more often than those traveling there by car.

- **Assess local permitting and regulations.** Most parklet programs require a permit from the municipality, requested and held by the business or property owner located adjacent to the space. To help ease this permitting process, involve municipal employees early on in the decision making. >

Considerations for Success *(continued)*

If this is a pilot program, work with them to determine what metrics they would need to see to allow a longer-term, changed use of the parking space.

- **Plan for longer-term space management.** Once constructed, parklets need to be maintained, cleaned, and managed so that they remain welcoming places for customers and community members. Business and property owners using them as extensions of their stores and restaurants often take on the management role. But publicly owned spaces,

such as tiny parks, will need managers too. That responsibility usually falls to the city parks department, but could fall under a Main Street manager's purview.

- **Evaluate the impact.** With any new program, local leaders should build in measurable metrics, and a plan for program evaluation and its success in serving the full community. With parklets and pedlets, this evaluation will provide data that could support expansion of the program or creation of long-term parklet and pedlet installations.

Adaptations for COVID-19

Depending on the community, state, and the stage of COVID-19 response and management, social distancing or limiting patrons in places of businesses may be required. Parklets and pedlets can be easy, quick, and relatively inexpensive to install and remove, and local leaders across the country are implementing parklet programs as a design solution to create more physical space for businesses in commercial districts.

Just as the San Francisco parklet program began as a pilot, cities and towns creating or expanding their own parklet programs as a COVID-19 response strategy are most often seeking temporary, short-term, immediate solutions. Duluth, Minnesota (pop. 89,000) first started its parklet program in 2014, and has now expanded that effort in light of COVID-19 to offer [temporary parklet use permits](#) for businesses to offer more physically safe space for customers, while also ensuring there is enough curbside space for [curbside pickup and delivery](#).

Dallas-based [Team Better Block](#) constructed a prototype parklet to fit social distancing requirements—with three tables set six feet apart—which has helped inspire the city to implement its own temporary parklet program. Meant to be a “quick fix” program for businesses in [commercial districts](#), permits will be issued and expedited on a first-come, first-served basis.

Examples

San Marcos, Texas

Parklets are already a familiar concept in San, Marcos, Texas (pop. 63,500). In addition to their annual Park(ing) Day, in 2015, the City introduced their [Sidewalk Cafés, Parklets, and Similar Special Uses of Public Rights-of-Way Ordinance](#) to create opportunities for repurposing underused public spaces, allowing up to five new parklets per year. Anticipating the need for guidance and place management, the City released a Streetscape Manual with photos, examples, guidance, resources to supplement the ordinance.

To aid downtown businesses in their COVID-19 response, the City built upon their ongoing public space activation work by launching a [temporary parklet program](#) in May 2020. This program's aims are two-fold: 1) support downtown businesses by offering an additional visible service area, and 2) enhance the downtown's aesthetic appeal. As with the 2015 ordinance, the City developed a robust [Temporary Parklet Manual](#) to guide businesses >



Blue Dahlia Bistro's parklet in San Marcos

Examples *(continued)*

on parklet design, best practices, and requirements. A local design firm is also contributing grant funding and design services to aid in their creation. To be approved, parklets must be accessible and safe to all people, and take up no more than two parking spaces. No more than two parklets are allowed in one city block, to allow for easier curbside delivery and pickup and to avoid road congestion. The City will be requesting all participants complete an exit survey to gather data on the program once it ends in August 2020.

West Allis, Wisconsin, and Great Falls, Montana

In 2013, [Urban Joe Café in West Allis, Wisconsin](#) (pop. 59,500) was one of the first businesses in the country to pilot pedlets. Downtown West Allis, Inc. (the city's Main Street program) and local businesses became interested in building parklets to activate underused parking spaces. When community members raised concerns about dining so close to traffic, local leaders helped plan an inverse solution by keeping the outdoor dining on the sidewalk and creating an accessible pedestrian path—guarded by three-foot fencing—around the seating area. Their unique solution has inspired other communities to do the same.

Inspired by the pedlets they toured in West Allis, Wisconsin, local leaders in Great Falls, Montana (pop. 58,700) decided to design [a seasonal pedlet program](#) of their own in 2016, led in partnership between the Great Falls Downtown Development Partnership (DDP), Business Improvement District (BID) and Downtown Great Falls. The Great Falls Pedlet program started with a downtown brewery, which purchased from the city the parking space adjacent to their business to allow for the pedlet to be in place six months. This ensured the city parking system would not lose revenue while it took time to revisit policies, procedures, and revenue streams to determine if this pedlet program could expand.

Since its initial launch, the Great Falls pedlet program has expanded to several other businesses in downtown Great Falls, and it has proven to have positive economic impact. [A 2017 Montana State University profile](#) noted that in one business alone, the pedlet program added 30 seats, created five jobs, and increased revenue by 20%.

In addition to economic impact, the Great Falls pedlet program has demonstrated critical accessibility and social impacts as well. All pedlets [comply with ADA](#)



Mighty Mo's pedlet in Great Falls, Montana

[requirements](#) so that pedlet paths meet the 48"-wide minimum, with protective guard rails. Understanding the importance of programming and community engagement, the Great Falls Downtown BID hosts a [Pedlet Passport](#) event, where attendees pick up a passport from their office, then visit each pedlet-participating business to get their passport stamps and be entered into raffles.

The Great Falls pedlet program also serves as a strong example of a successful [private-public partnership](#). Locally-led and partially-funded by the DDP, BID, and Main Street program, the pedlet program has received funding from the Montana Main Street Program, NeighborWorks Great Falls, and City of Great Falls, as well as input and participation from local businesses and city's Parking Division. This program's strong multi-sector leadership—as well as its clear economic, accessibility, and social benefits—offer a strong case study of the power of public space activation in commercial districts. In the wake of COVID-19, the Great Falls BID has fielded inquiries from across the country about their pedlet program, demonstrating just how important these space-creation strategies can be as part of COVID-19 management efforts.

Further Reading

Benefits

- **Community Building:** Project for Public Spaces' [Halís Parklet Case Study](#), and UCD's [The Case for Parklets: Measuring the Impact on Sidewalk Vitality and Neighborhood Businesses](#)
- **Economic Impact:** NACTO's [From Parking to Park: Transportation Values and the Value of Parklets](#), and Smart Growth America's [Parklet Policy Primer](#).
- **Health:** AARP's [How to Create a Parklet](#).

General

- [NACTO Design Guide: Parklets](#), National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO)
- [Pop-Up Placemaking Tool Kit](#), AARP Livable Communities
- [Reclaiming the Right-of-way: A Toolkit for Creating and Implementing Parklets](#), UCLA Complete Streets Initiative Luskin School of Public Affairs
- [San Francisco Parklet Manual](#), GroundPlay SF

Contact us

For more information or for more guidance on how to implement an open streets program, reach out to:

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About the Series: Produced in collaboration between Main Street America and AARP Livable Communities, *Commercial District Design: COVID-19 Response and Management* is a series of design-centered briefs developed to equip community leaders with safe, equitable, age-friendly strategies to support economic recovery from the impacts of COVID-19.

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