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Santa Barbara City Council Allows Sidewalk, Curbside Dining, Closes Two Blocks of State Street

Temporary move to help local restaurants may ultimately lead to more permanent closures



Laura Knight, owner of Pascucci on the 500 block of State Street, is pleased that that Santa Barbara will allow outdoor dining and close some blocks of State Street. (Joshua Molina / Noozhawk photo)

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It took a global pandemic to close State Street to cars.

The Santa Barbara City Council voted 7-0 Tuesday to halt vehicular traffic on the 500 and 1200 blocks of State Street. The closure will allow restaurants on those blocks to place tables and chairs on the sidewalk in front of their businesses.



Gov. Gavin Newsom is expected in the next few days to give the okay for Santa Barbara County to allow people to eat inside restaurants. The approval will mean that restaurants will have to space out their tables so that everyone is at least six feet apart. Social distancing could mean restaurants would lose about half of their indoor seating.

The council agreed to let restaurants place tables on the sidewalks, in their back parking lots and on curbside parking spots, known as "parklets." The changes would apply to all restaurants citywide. The city staff will consider in the next few days expanding the closures to other streets, in consultation with restaurant owners block-by-block. The State Street closures are designed to be temporary, as Santa Barbara looks to pull itself out of the pandemic nightmare.

"These solutions will bring people to the restaurants," said Bob Stout, president of the Downtown Association, and owner of the Little Kitchen Restaurant on West Ortega Street. "What we are trying to do is bring Santa Barbara alive a little bit."

The vote capped an emotional, uneven meeting that saw council members wrestling with how to act quickly to help restaurants clinging to life after the governor's stay-at-home order and forced

closure of dine-in restaurants in March. By some estimates, 30 percent of restaurants won't survive the shutdown. While take-out and delivery has helped some restaurants keep afloat, it's not a longterm solution because profit margins are often thin and restaurants need volume and full capacity to maintain longterm viability.

"We believe that as public health allows, our restaurants want to and need to be open all day and every day," said Pat McElroy, former Santa Barbara city fire chief and chairman of Common Table. "These businesses are the heart and soul of Santa Barbara."

He said the city should help the restaurants survive.



Businesses will be able to use sidewalks for table service to accommodate social distancing. (Joshua Molina / Noozhawk photo)

"What restaurants need is the ability for them to expand their footprint to adjacent outdoor areas so they can continue to serve customers in a safe environment without having to severely limit the number of patrons they serve," McElroy said.

City Administrator Paul Casey said the city would consider expanding the temporary street closures to other blocks.

Mayor Cathy Murillo at one point during the meeting said that closing the entire street could create https://www.noozhawk.com/article/santa_barbara_city_council_votes_to_close_two_blocks_of_state_street_to_car?utm_source=Noozhawk&utm_campaign=d0eb3... 3/16

a festival-like atmosphere, which would create other social distancing problems. As it stands now, restaurants throughout the city would be able to put tables in front of their restaurants and next to the street, as long as they were six feet apart. Pedestrians would need enough space to walk between the tables.

On side streets, restaurants would be able to use curbside parking to create parklets, separated from the street by planters, to expand their seating. Restaurants would have to individually seek alcohol and beverage expansion permits, but that agency has already indicated that it is supportive of restaurants' temporary expansion to accommodate social distancing.

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The city's proposal stemmed from Jason Harris, economic development manager, and his conversations with restaurant owners throughout the city.

Sherry Villanueva, CEO of Acme Hospitality and owner of The Lark in the Funk Zone, Paradise Cafe and six other restaurants in Santa Barbara, urged the city to act immediately and take more time to study whether to close additional blocks of State Street because.

"This is a proven concept in cities throughout the world and all over America," Villanueva said. "There is adjacent outdoor dining happening that allows even one or two tables, it might not be sufficient, but it will work immediately in an emergency response."

Councilwoman Meagan Harmon agreed that Harris, Casey and city staff should work directly with restaurant owners to figure out if more blocks on State Street should be closed.

"I, too, am so excited about the concept of closing down certain blocks of State Street," Harmon said. "It is such a good moment to have that conversation. But if we are hearing from the businesses themselves that there needs to be a first order of business to allow them to survive in the immediate, I think we really need to speak strongly that those actions need to be taken today."

Laura Knight, owner of Pascucci on State Street, told Noozhawk on Tuesday that allowing restaurants to move tables out onto the sidewalk is great plan.

"Going to 50 percent occupancy for a restaurant is just not going to work," Knight said. "We operate on a very slim profit margin. Having been pretty much shut down for the past couple of months, those of us offering takeout, everybody's lost a lot of money so to try and re-open our doors with half the seating would be very difficult. We would have less staff and we would not be able to bring our employees back full-time."

Councilman Mike Jordan said he was supportive of closing down parts of State Street, and he urged

people to pay downtown a visit.

"We're not going to open up the downtown core, the businesses aren't going to open up the downtown core, it's the customers that will open the downtown core, so any of these plans we make are reliant on me, you and other community members actually coming downtown," Jordan said.

The council technically took the first step toward creating an emergency ordinance that will be formally approved in two weeks. Tuesday's vote, however, gives Casey the power to immediately allow the outdoor dining and street closure, once Gov. Newsom approves Santa Barbara's request for restaurants to re-open.

Casey said now is the time to get creative.

"Let's do it," Casey said. "This is exciting."

— *Noozhawk* staff writer Joshua Molina can be reached at jmolina@noozhawk.com. Follow Noozhawk on Twitter: [@noozhawk](#), [@NoozhawkNews](#) and [@NoozhawkBiz](#). Connect with Noozhawk on Facebook.



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