



AIA Austin

December 16, 2020

The Honorable Steve Adler, Mayor
Honorable City Council Members
City Manager Spencer Cronk

RE: Downtown Recovery from COVID-19

Dear Mayor, City Council Members, and City Manager,

AIA Austin's Urban Design Committee's mission is to "improve the quality of the urban environment by promoting excellence in design, planning, and public policy in the built environment." I write today with the committee's recommendations on how our downtown business district can be empowered to recover from the economic and social impacts of COVID-19 through the use of public right-of-way space.

This committee has a history of encouraging the city to look at public right-of-way differently in an effort to promote social interaction, wellness, and economic vibrancy in our city. The AIA Austin Urban Design Committee has collaborated with the City on prior initiatives such as Nightwing Plaza, where we hosted a pop-up event to promote the use of the free right-hand turn lane to become a public plaza. Spaces like Nightwing Plaza could be instrumental for space-restricted businesses to generate revenue during COVID-19. A challenge is that the current permitting mechanisms in place represent hurdles for small businesses to realize the potential of their adjacent open spaces.

Prior to COVID-19 restrictions, [Sidewalk Cafe](#) or [Street Patio](#) permits were the methods businesses use to inhabit right-of-way to conduct business. The City's [Shop the Block](#) program reduces costs and allows other retailers than those selling food and drink to conduct business in the right of way. A public sidewalk or parking space closure through Shop the Block has an application fee of \$100, a usage fee of \$50 every 30 days, an inspection fee of \$76, a tent fee per tent and a \$50 refundable deposit. The same fees apply for a public street, alley or travel lane closure, but with a larger application fee of \$250, a \$200 per block per day fee, and a \$2,000 refundable deposit. Both applications require a set of documents to be submitted and sealed by a licensed professional and have a complex process for approval, which makes the process a burden for small businesses to take advantage of. To address these challenges, we recommend that:

- The fees for the Shop the Block program be greatly reduced or eliminated for the duration of time that the City of Austin is at Stage 1 or beyond in its pandemic response.



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- City of Austin staff should generate and make available to the public a GIS map of Right of Way spaces both inside and outside the CBD where the enhanced Shop the Block permitting measures will be enacted.
- City of Austin should support businesses by providing funds for the purchase or renting of new outdoor furniture and infrastructure.
- While Austin-Travis County health guidelines indicate Stages 1 or beyond in this pandemic, City of Austin should encourage and allow business owners to organize “Tactical Urbanism” and/or pop-up events on the ROWs, without a permitting fee/process, as long as these events and demonstrations follow the appropriate City guidelines that are currently in place.
- City of Austin staff should generate and make available to the public a GIS map of public space in the CBD (and areas beyond the CBD) where Tactical Urbanism and Pop-up events are encouraged.

New York City’s Open Restaurant program is an excellent example of several of these measures being implemented. This program is self-certified and does not require fees to participate. Participants self-register and this data can easily be found on the city’s GIS website: <https://www1.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/pedestrians/openrestaurants.shtml> In addition to these measures, we also recommend that the City move forward with temporary installations around downtown that allow pedestrians to move more freely, and with greater space between groups. These efforts are intended to transition into permanent structures that will create a more vibrant and safe pedestrian environment. As part of this larger effort, we recommend that:

- The [Congress Avenue Urban Design Initiative](#) be implemented in a temporary form to the greatest extent possible.
- Temporary street closures be utilized to support local businesses to the greatest extent possible, similar to [Boston’s Healthy Streets](#) program.
- The Urban Design Guidelines be revisited to encourage an appropriate mix and types of transportation downtown, as well as spaces for gathering.

AIA Austin understands that the City is currently working diligently to distribute CARES Act funding for small businesses and other organizations in Austin. We encourage that work to continue or expand to the greatest extent possible to free downtown businesses from overhead burdens such as rent and utilities.

We appreciate your time and consideration. Sincerely,

Eric Rauser, AIA
AIA Austin President