

Via Email

May 31, 2020

Palo Alto City Council

Honorable Mayor Fine and City Council members,

The Palo Alto Chamber of Commerce enthusiastically supports creating pedestrian/bike-only, pilot street closure projects on University and California Avenues to allow for outdoor retail and restaurant use.

To gauge business sentiment and willingness to experiment with street closures, we conducted surveys with businesses in the two commercial zones over the past two weeks. The results show an extraordinarily high percentage of support for partial street closures on both streets, by both restaurants and other business owners, and for all weekdays.

The response from **University Avenue** businesses was 61% “strongly in favor” and 22% “in favor with reservations,” for a total of **83% in favor**. 16% were “opposed.”

The response from **California Avenue** businesses was 81% “strongly in favor” and 12% “in favor with reservations,” for a total of **93% in favor**. 8% were “opposed.”

In addition, 63% of University Ave respondents and 79% of Cal Ave respondents agreed that, to avoid confusion, the **street closures should be all days of the week** to better judge the success of the pilot projects, and 66% of University Ave respondents and 45% of Cal Ave respondents agreed that “to encourage longer shopping periods and accommodate pedestrian walk-time, [the City should] **extend weekday parking hours** for both street and garage parking.”

We believe respondents’ concerns about adequate parking nearby, access for trash pickup and delivery trucks, and ability to locate businesses can be met with simple solutions, such as signage and shopping time restrictions. The Chamber proposes that the City consider the following strategies, some being longer term:

- extend street and garage parking limits to accommodate shoppers’ walk-time,
- change 1 to 2 floors of underutilized permit parking garage spaces to regular parking, made more feasible given the predicted reduction in on-site office workers’ parking needs going forward,
- change permit to regular parking on the west side of Alma Street from Everett to Palo Alto Avenue,
- create specially designated, short-term parking zones at side streets for pickup/delivery, car share/taxi services and bike racks, and
- evaluate the program monthly for modifications as needed, and conduct an in depth review of the program’s success after 5-6 months.

These changes alone would add nearby, accessible parking spaces in both commercial zones, dozens more than the ones being lost by street closures or parklets, within a short walk of the businesses while mitigating any increase in adjacent neighborhood parking.

We reviewed the survey results with City Manager Ed Shikada on Friday and are gratified that he then reached out to businesses in these two areas to begin working with them on plans for sharing the streets.

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Restaurateurs have warned that when reopening is permitted, safe table distancing rules will render them financially unable to succeed with only inside dining unless they are may add outdoor seating. Acknowledging this situation, Gov. Newsom has stated that restaurants should "prioritize" outdoor seating when their local jurisdictions meet the criteria for reopening.

Palo Alto already has experience with successful pedestrian-only shopping, such as the California Avenue Farmers Market, the Palo Alto Art Festival and Stanford Shopping Center. Pedestrian/bike-only shopping areas in commercial zones are currently being considered or already being created in other Bay Area cities, such as Redwood City, San Carlos, Burlingame and Berkeley, and highly successful pedestrian only commercial zones exist in such cities as Boulder and Santa Monica. Pedestrian and bike-only street malls are popular throughout Europe, and parklets using street parking spaces are already allowed in such local cities as Menlo Park and Santa Cruz.

We believe the survey results strongly reinforce the calls by both residents and businesses for the City to help commercial districts recover from the Covid-19 closures by partially closing these two commercial streets to cars and allowing businesses to safely serve customers outdoors.

With the decrease in car usage and parking demand, and the need for restaurants, the linchpins of our commercial districts, to be able to reopen in a financially sustainable way, the timing is perfect to conduct these pilot programs and see if it works for our community and our businesses.

We respectfully urge the City Council to expedite the approval of these street sharing proposals.

Sincerely,

Judy Kleinberg
President

Charlie Weidanz
CEO