

**CITY OF BOULDER
TRANSPORTATION ADVISORY BOARD
AGENDA ITEM**

MEETING DATE: September 12, 2022

AGENDA TITLE: West Pearl Update
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PRESENTER/S:

Brad Mueller, Director of Planning & Development Services
Alison Rhodes, Director of Parks & Recreation
Mark Davison, Parks and Recreation, Senior Planning Manager
Cris Jones, Interim Director of Community Vitality
Natalie Stiffler, Interim Director of Transportation & Mobility
Devin Joslin, Civil Engineering Senior Manager
Edward Stafford, Civil Engineering Senior Manager
Kathleen King, City Principal Planner, Comprehensive Planning
Teresa Pinkal, Community Vitality Senior Manager
Reegan Brown, Community Vitality Senior Project Manager
Chelsea Sullivan, Community Vitality Project Analyst

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This memo provides context for the Transportation Advisory Board’s Sept. 12, 2022, meeting regarding the planned end of the COVID-19 related temporary vehicle closure of west Pearl Street and next steps regarding exploration of street repurposing and its relationship to current and upcoming planning processes such as the Downtown Boulder Partnership’s Downtown Vision Plan and various city-led planning initiatives in and around the downtown area.

KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED

Boulder and its downtown have benefited from a long and rich history of thoughtful and intentional planning efforts that have slowly and methodically shaped the community into the city it is today. The COVID-19 pandemic, conversely, necessitated urgent and decisive actions in order to respond to and recover from a rapidly evolving emergency that has had, and continues to have, profound impacts on our community, our downtown, and businesses in general. Among the many urgent actions that were pursued by the City of Boulder at the height of the pandemic, the closure of west Pearl Street from 9th to 11th streets, remains as one of the remaining, most visible, and impactful temporary actions taken by the city to respond to and recover from the effects of the pandemic.

At its April 19, 2022, council meeting, staff received mixed feedback on whether and how to maintain west Pearl Street open to pedestrian traffic as the expiration of emergency orders drew near. At least five council members expressed a desire to find a path by which west Pearl Street could remain closed to traffic in the future (either on a permanent or a seasonal basis), though

others expressed concerns about the business and equity impacts of such a permanent closure. Staff agreed to continue looking at this issue once they finished work on the outdoor dining pilot program and would come back to City Council with additional information in response to the initial feedback they received to see how and if the council body wanted to consider adding the permanent closure of west Pearl to staff's workplan in the future.

Now, with all related emergency orders having ended as of Aug. 31, 2022, staff is working to return to the practice of pursuing thoughtful and intentional planning efforts to reimagine and shape the future of the community. In addition to the pandemic related health benefits, staff recognize the transportation and climate related livability benefits of having the street closed to vehicles during this time. At this time, in consideration of challenges related to economic vitality, safety, accessibility, equity, and operations, staff again is seeking council direction regarding the desired state of west Pearl Street while staff and city partners pursue various planning processes that will help inform near- and long-term possibilities for transformation in the downtown and civic areas.

Questions for TAB

1. In consideration of the planned end of the COVID-19 related temporary closure of west Pearl Street, what questions does TAB have regarding the staff recommendation to begin a new workplan item to pursue a West End Multimodal Analysis, to inform possible options for future reconfiguration of streets in the west end of Pearl area?
2. Does TAB have questions regarding the current and upcoming planning processes that will help inform the near- and long-term possibilities for west Pearl Street and other areas in and around the downtown area?

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

With the expiration of Covid-19 emergency orders and given the existing safety and equity concerns, in addition to the lack of support from the immediately impacted businesses in this area, staff from Community Vitality, Transportation and Mobility and Planning and Development Services recommend that we both discontinue the Covid-19 related temporary closure of west Pearl Street between 9th and 11th streets to vehicle traffic in as timely a manner as possible AND work with various stakeholders to pursue planning processes that will help inform near- and long-term possibilities for transformation in the downtown and civic areas that could include a permanent closure of west Pearl or possibly other city streets in downtown and across the city in the future.

PUBLIC FEEDBACK

Several questionnaires and surveys have been performed by the city and its partners related to the COVID-19 pandemic, its effects on the local economy, and public perception of various actions and interventions taken by the city. While council members indicated at their April 19, 2022, meeting that additional community-wide engagement, including use of the Racial Equity Instrument, is needed to better inform decisions around the future of west Pearl Street, staff has not yet been able to pursue any official work plan effort that has included formal and robust public outreach and engagement related to the closure of west Pearl Street. One targeted survey

of businesses located within the west Pearl Street closure area was performed by Community Vitality staff between March 24 and April 4, 2022. Results from that survey were shared with council in their April 19, 2022 [meeting packet](#). Additional community engagement will be incorporated into future planning efforts regarding access and mobility in the downtown including the west end multimodal analysis.

BACKGROUND

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the city quickly formed the Boulder Business Response and Recovery Alliance (BBRRA) in partnership with the Boulder Chamber, the Latino Chamber of Commerce, the Boulder Convention & Visitors Bureau, the Small Business Development Center and the Downtown Boulder Partnership. Some of the early action items identified by the BBRRA and implemented by the city in response to reduced occupancy rules for businesses and social distancing requirements, included the temporary outdoor expansion program for businesses and the temporary closures of the West End (west Pearl Street from 9th to 11th streets) in the downtown and the University Hill Event Street (Pennsylvania Avenue from the 1200 block alley to 13th Street). The street closures allowed for maximum seating expansion outside for restaurants in those areas. Transportation & Mobility also implemented [Shared Streets](#) at six locations across the city in 2020. Through that process, we found that Shared Streets required significant staff time and funding to implement and operate, even when piloted for short periods of time, without a significant increase in pedestrian/cycling utilization. As a result, with the Transportation Advisory Board's support, staff decided not to continue with a Shared Streets Program to focus those resources on other prioritized projects and programs.

West Pearl Street officially closed to vehicle traffic on May 28, 2020 and has remained closed to vehicles for the duration of the pandemic. In addition to the pandemic related health benefits of outdoor dining along west Pearl, staff recognize the transportation and climate related livability benefits of having the street closed to vehicles during this time. Many people enjoyed having the ability to more comfortably walk and bike along this segment of Pearl Street without the need to consider potential conflicts with vehicles coming and going from the corridor. Having the space activated with people walking, biking, and dining made for a welcoming and attractive space especially during the warmer spring and summer months.

While the closure was initially implemented to benefit West End businesses during the height of the pandemic restrictions, as reduced occupancy and social distancing requirements have subsided, the perceived benefits of having the additional space to operate have become less important to restaurants that now report struggling with staffing shortages, kitchen capacity limitations, and general business accessibility issues. Consequently, as restaurants have been transitioning from the free temporary outdoor expansion program to the five-year [Outdoor Dining Pilot Program](#), several have elected to discontinue their outdoor expansions on west Pearl Street while also expressing a desire to reopen the street to vehicle traffic.

Now, with restaurants having either removed their outdoor dining expansions entirely or reduced their footprints out of designated travel lanes, the city can opt to safely reopen west Pearl Street to vehicle traffic while also pursuing and/or participating in various planning initiatives that will inform near- and long-term possibilities for transformation throughout the downtown and surrounding areas. Each of the following current and anticipated planning efforts will incorporate

a traditional approach to ensure thorough data collection and measurement, thoughtful development and analysis of options, robust and inclusive community engagement, and a comprehensive implementation strategy. The various current and anticipated planning efforts are outlined below.

- **West End Multimodal Analysis**

In the near-term, to inform future access and mobility of West Pearl, Transportation and Mobility, with support from Community Vitality, will pursue an analysis and policy discussion to address city street repurposing through engagement with the community and related city departments. In 2023, a high-level study of the west Pearl Street closure, West End Multimodal Analysis, is planned to be completed. The goal of the West End Multimodal Analysis is to consider future options and quantify the transportation operations and maintenance impacts of the closure on overall downtown multimodal circulation patterns, particularly along Walnut, Spruce, 9th, 10th, and 11th streets, and Broadway, compared to pre-pandemic conditions.

The study will analyze the following information at key downtown intersections: street widths, lane configurations, daily and peak hour traffic volumes; crash data; transit routes, stop locations, and boarding/alighting data; changes to snowplow and street sweeping routes and snow storage areas; access to loading zones and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) parking spaces; and staff time and costs associated with maintaining and inspecting traffic control devices associated with the closure. Transportation and Mobility staff collected vehicle traffic data on surrounding streets during the closure in order to be able to compare and analyze the effect of the closure as part of this analysis. The study will explore the multimodal impacts of various options for a west Pearl Street closure or reconfiguration, including alternatives such as seasonal or weekend closures. The study will consider input from community members across the city and provide a thoughtful process for when, why, and how to consider potential future closures or reconfigurations of west Pearl Street.

With current resources, this work item can begin in early 2023, with recommendations available for consideration and implementation by summer 2023.

- **Downtown Boulder Vision Plan**

As the community emerges and adapts to significant social, cultural, and environmental changes ahead of the 50th anniversary of the Pearl Street Mall in 2027, the Downtown Boulder Partnership began a thoughtful process to reveal a collectively derived vision for downtown Boulder in May 2022. This five-year vision plan will act as a reference point for strategic partners and inform policy and resource decisions for the Downtown Boulder Partnership (DBP). Beginning in April and running through September 2022, DBP and MIG, Inc. (the project's competitively selected consulting firm) have hosted several community engagement efforts to collect feedback. These efforts include focus groups with downtown employees, University of Colorado-Boulder staff, arts and events organizations, and regional residents; a stakeholder charrette with community leaders; a Be Heard Boulder community survey (in partnership with the City of Boulder); and pop-up intercept sessions at various existing events, recreation centers, and community hubs around the greater Boulder area.

Drawing from stakeholder input, public engagement, existing studies/city frameworks, and global/regional trends, the five-year Downtown Boulder Vision Plan aims to reveal

findings and proposals in a publicly available document that will be drafted and distributed in October 2022. The Vision Plan document will highlight opportunities and proposals specific to economic vitality; downtown identity and branding; future potential public enhancements; programming and placemaking; equity, diversity, and inclusion; climate resiliency; access and physical connectivity; and proposed funding/management structures. Additional desired outcomes may include dynamic, ongoing public engagement and a system of metrics to track implementation progress.

- **Pearl Street Revitalization**

The Pearl Street revitalization is to ensure that the Pearl Street Mall is poised for another 50 years of supporting community vibrancy at its 50th anniversary in 2027. The project has \$4 million from Community, Culture, Resilience, and Safety (CCRS) tax funding to design and implement the changes. The design phase of this project is set to kick off in 2024 with construction beginning in 2026.

- **Downtown Mobility Study**

Downtown Mobility Study was identified as a project in the Core Arterial Network (CAN) concept, which is one of City Council's top priorities to address safe, comfortable, and convenient connections for people to get where they need to go. The Downtown Mobility Study will consider multimodal connections and access throughout the downtown and in connection to other activity centers in Boulder. This study is currently slated to begin in mid-2024 dependent on staffing and funding. There is no funding currently identified for the Downtown Mobility Study.

- **Civic Area Master Plan Implementation**

The Civic Area is the largest publicly owned space in the heart of Boulder, and the master plan outlines a framework "that allows Boulder to maintain a sense of place in the heart of the city while positioning the area to be a model of future innovation." Eight million dollars of CCRS funding has been allocated to this project. In planning for the next phase of the Civic Area implementation plan are two projects; The East End: Food and Innovation (13th & 14th Street Block) project and the Central Park Refurbishment. In addition, there is consideration being given to a pedestrian friendly 13th Street connector between Pearl Street and the Civic Area and how that can be integrated into this phase of master plan implementation for the Civic Area. The design phase of the project is scheduled to begin in 2023 and construction in 2025. Measurements of a successful project would be in alignment with the Civic Area Master Plan and its guiding principles. Support from appropriate stakeholder groups, including advisory boards and commissions, and City Council as well as collaborative partnerships with local business owners.

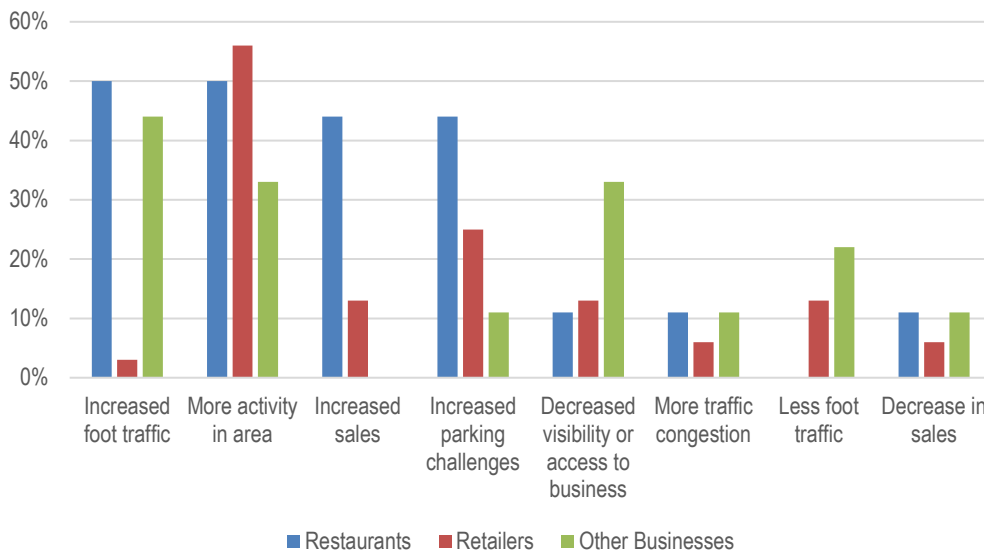
ANALYSIS

The west Pearl Street area has remained closed to vehicle traffic throughout much of the pandemic. To help analyze the impact of the west Pearl Street closure, staff completed a survey to specifically target West End businesses to understand their experience and evaluate support of a continued closure. Staff also evaluated the closure against five primary considerations, including economic vitality, safety, accessibility, equity, and operations. Concerns identified within these areas of consideration are outlined below. Staff will further analyze these impacts as part of the West End Multimodal Analysis in 2023.

- **Economic Vitality**

In the early days of the pandemic, economic vitality concerns and considerations largely drove the decisions that led to a variety of actions taken by the city to support the business community. With the effects of the pandemic now passing, it is important to consider how the pandemic and the temporary closure of west Pearl Street affected West End businesses. To that end, staff completed a West Pearl Business Survey in March and April of 2022 to determine business perceptions of the closure. While some businesses reported increased foot traffic and more activity in the area, others reported increased parking challenges and decreased visibility and access to their businesses as illustrated in **Figure 1**.

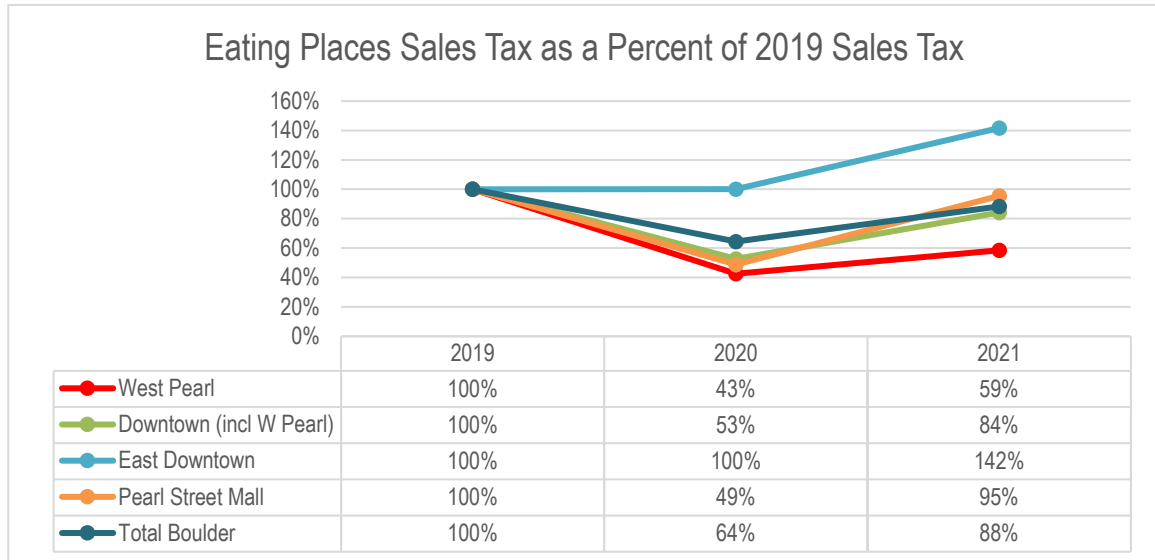
FIGURE 1: FACTORS EXPERIENCED BY BUSINESSES DURING TEMPORARY CLOSURE OF WEST PEARL



In May 2022, The Downtown Boulder Partnership completed a west Pearl Street survey to determine business sentiment regarding the road closure. A majority (43%) of respondents, 53% of which represented businesses in the west end district, were supportive of a permanent reopening, while 37% expressed interest in a permanent closure.

Staff further analyzed sales tax performance for eating places on west Pearl Street as a percent of 2019 sales tax receipts. In 2021, sales tax receipts from eating places on west Pearl Street were at 59% of what they had been in 2019 versus 84% for all of downtown and 88% citywide as shown in **Figure 2**.

FIGURE 2: EATING PLACES SALES TAX AS A PERCENT OF 2019 SALES TAX



In a position statement supporting the reopening of west Pearl Street by the Downtown Boulder Partnership (ATTACHMENT A), the organization emphasized that “the criteria for success of repurposing any street in the public right-of-way within a commercial district, needs to be measured by the revenue of the impacted businesses. As obvious as that assertion might be, it cannot be overstated. Based on the data available to date, the West End street closure has not been a success.” DBP is committed to supporting opportunities for repurposing streets that would enhance economic vitality.

▪ **Safety**

Safety considerations related to the west Pearl Street closure include emergency vehicle access, use of motorcycles and scooters within the boundaries of the closure, and general mobility through the area. Currently, concrete barriers at 9th and 11th streets restrict emergency vehicles to one access point on 10th Street where barriers are movable. Staff have witnessed motorcycles and motorized scooters being used and parked within the boundaries of the closure. Lastly, it is important to note that traffic flows built around the original vision for Pearl Street Mall included vehicular access through the west Pearl Street corridor. The closure has created challenges with directional traffic flow, including drop-offs occurring in inconsistent areas and parked cars frequently located at 9th and Pearl streets and 11th and Pearl streets.

▪ **Accessibility**

Accessibility considerations include ADA compliance, access to loading zones, micromobility, and emergency vehicle access. People with disabilities who use vehicles and desire curbside parking directly in front of their destination must find alternatives to access preferred destinations within the closure or avoid the area altogether. Furthermore, the closure poses limited access to loading zones, micromobility pick-up and drop-off locations, and challenges with emergency vehicle access. Reopening Pearl Street between 9th and 11th streets would reestablish access to six handicapped parking spaces (two along

Pearl Street and four along 10th Street). Options to reconfigure 10th Street to enhance accessibility will be explored as part of the West End Multimodal Analysis.

- **Equity**

In terms of equity, the West End closure has created an inconsistent playing field for different business types. In particular, restaurants that built their business model around a fast-casual dining experience report that they have struggled to provide the same level of service during the closure period. Those who have created a sit-down dining model have been less impacted since the onset of the closure. Furthermore, restaurants with access to more capital resources have been able to expand their footprints significantly with more elaborate structures and required fencing than those with more limited resources. In addition to equity concerns among businesses directly in the corridor, there are also geographic equity considerations that staff may need to consider as part of a more holistic and comprehensive planning process to consider opportunities for increased shared or open streets that could benefit additional city neighborhoods and businesses across the city.

- **Operations**

Key considerations related to city operations include snow removal, street sweeping, access to public and private utilities, HOP bus routing and other general maintenance that may be needed within the boundaries of the closure. Similar to challenges outlined above under ‘Safety,’ concrete barriers would need to be removed for the city to effectively maintain the area within the closure. The outdoor dining pilot program infrastructure has been selected to be temporary and easily movable if utilities or other assets within the public right of way need to be accessed or cleaned. The existing concrete barriers can be removed to reopen the street with advance planning (approximately one week notice). In addition, the temporary closure required modifications to the traffic signal operations at the Pearl Street intersections with 9th and 11th streets, such as deactivating left turn phases, bagging signal heads, and reallocating time for vehicular phases not in use to pedestrian crossing time. Changes to the traffic signals can be accomplished with advance planning (approximately one week notice).

Furthermore, the HOP bus route was rerouted from the section of Pearl Street between 9th and 11th streets and from the section of Pearl Street between 15th and 20th streets to support the outdoor dining pilot program. Returning the HOP to Pearl Street routing allows for more direct access to downtown for riders, bus operations to be bi-directional along Pearl, and the availability of permanent and accessible bus stops. Rerouting the HOP will require fourteen (14) days of advance notice to coordinate bus operations and customer messaging with Via Mobility Services, the operator of the HOP. If a future permanent closure of the West End is implemented it would require new permanent bus stops, parking changes, and street treatments to best support passenger access and bus operations along Walnut.

NEXT STEPS

- End the temporary closure of west Pearl Street by Sept. 30, 2022, and, pending a City Council nod of five in the affirmative, add consideration of a permanent closure to staff's 2023 workplan.
- Continued collaboration with the Downtown Boulder Partnership on the development of their Downtown Vision Plan and its associated proposals.
- Continued scope development of upcoming city-led planning initiatives related to possible transformations in and around the downtown area.
- Formalize West End Multimodal Analysis as part of the Department of Transportation and Mobility's 2023 Work Plan with support from the Community Vitality Department.

Attachments

- Attachment A: Downtown Boulder Partnership – West End Position



The Downtown Boulder Partnership (DBP) supports reopening West Pearl Street (between 9th and 11th streets) to vehicular access as soon as possible, while continuing to consider options to repurpose streets and public spaces throughout the downtown district.

The City of Boulder's swift response to COVID-19 impacts in 2020 included initiatives that provided much needed support for businesses, such as outdoor dining expansions and the temporary closure of Pearl Street between 9th and 11th streets. As we move forward in the recovery process, DBP and the impacted businesses thank City Council for their unanimous support of the 5-year pilot program to continue outdoor dining opportunities throughout the city.

While the outdoor dining pilot provides the opportunity for establishments to opt-in to participate, the temporary closure of the West End does not provide any opt-in options to the West End business community - who are essential for the district's continued success. Many of these businesses have expressed that should the temporary closure be extended past this summer, it will continue to be detrimental to their operations as they continue post-pandemic recovery efforts. Representing the best interests of our membership base, DBP would like the temporary closure to be lifted while the city looks to better understand the mitigating impacts of various scenarios over the course of the next several months.. Altering the circulation of vehicular traffic, as well as parking impacts on West End accessibility without sufficient study could not only continue to negatively affect West End businesses, but potentially undermine the intentional design of the four block pedestrian mall and the surrounding commercial district. DBP's stance on this position comes after soliciting extensive input with impacted businesses on the West End, in addition to sales tax analysis comparing West End business recovery with city-wide levels, and consultation with urban design and walkability experts.

As emergency orders expire, the Downtown Boulder Partnership, in collaboration with the City of Boulder, is currently exploring public space enhancement opportunities in the downtown district as part of the development of a 5-year Downtown Vision Plan. Learning from pandemic responses, best practices, community input and existing studies, the visioning process is exploring potential long term options for the West End, including but not limited to a seasonal or flexible street closure. Other potential street repurposing opportunities throughout the downtown will also be considered as part of the visioning process, which will include broad community input. The Downtown Vision Plan will be shared publicly in the fall of 2022.

Walkability

Downtown Boulder has enjoyed a legacy as one of the more pedestrian-friendly downtowns in the country, with the Pearl Street Mall as the centerpiece. This acclaim is no accident. Those assembled for the design and implementation of the Pearl Street Mall nearly a half a century ago conducted years of study and took into consideration a multitude of factors including the ideal length of the mall, the vehicular circulation and proximity of parking. The point is not that what was studied then is necessarily still fully relevant, but rather that the design was studied thoughtfully and extensively.

Economic Vitality

Prior to the pandemic, the West End of Pearl Street, beginning at 11th Street and continuing to the west, was by many measures among the most successful few blocks, commercially and socially, in Boulder. The vibrancy experienced in this micro district was due to many factors including the adjacency and the contrast to the Pearl Street Mall. Since the closing of the street on West Pearl, Sales tax revenues have lagged, relative to other commercial areas within the city. In an interview with Urban Planner and author of the acclaimed book *Walkable City*, Jeff Speck asserted to DBP staff that the criteria for success of repurposing any street in the public right-of-way within a commercial district, needs to be measured by the revenue of the impacted businesses. As obvious as that assertion might be, it can not be overstated. Based on the data available to date, the West End street closure has not been a success. DBP is committed to supporting opportunities for repurposing streets that would enhance economic vitality.