

# Temporary to Transformative

Leveraging San Francisco's pandemic programs to usher in a new era for the city's streets



## Acknowledgments

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## Introduction

# A Vision for Streets as an Equitable Civic Asset

While the COVID-19 pandemic brought considerable hardship, community and government response to the emergency also gave us lessons about the resilience and flexibility of cities, providing a rare window of opportunity to reexamine how our streets serve us. In San Francisco, a number of roadways began to look and feel different: The city expanded transit priority lanes and bike lanes, replaced the Great Highway with a linear park and opened up JFK Drive in Golden Gate Park for walking, biking and rolling. Through the program Shared Spaces, entire swaths of streets previously used only for parking were transformed into outdoor dining destinations. Even subtle shifts — such as the addition of a few barricades at intersections with an invitation for families, cyclists and musicians to leave the sidewalk and enter the street — were embraced with enthusiasm, as a network of “slow streets” and pop-up plazas began to connect residential neighborhoods.

During the pandemic, cities like San Francisco learned that streets could be used to improve communities. This is especially impactful because streets are so ubiquitous — nearly 30% of San Francisco is taken up by streets. And while the city has a park within a 10-minute walk of every home,<sup>1</sup> there is a street even closer — within just a few steps of every resident in the city. However, an estimated 95% of San Francisco’s streets are dedicated to cars.<sup>2</sup> If the city begins to consider its streets as part of the open-space network, it could dramatically increase the quality of life for every resident.

These transformations offer a vision for the city’s streets that is untethered from its car-oriented past and well-suited for a more sustainable future. The pandemic coincided with California’s worst fire season to date, which culminated locally on September 9, 2020, when San Franciscans woke up to a smoky orange sky that blocked out the sun, a sign that was hard to ignore. Securing a safe and healthy future will require doubling down on sustainable ways to move around cities. The quick action of San Francisco’s leaders revealed not only that many alternatives are well within reach but also that many San Franciscans are eager to embrace a city where people walk, bike or take transit to most places. Perhaps more importantly, these changes revealed a new path for taking big, ambitious steps forward: If cities act boldly, and continuously listen and improve as they go, the sky will not fall. It might even become clearer.

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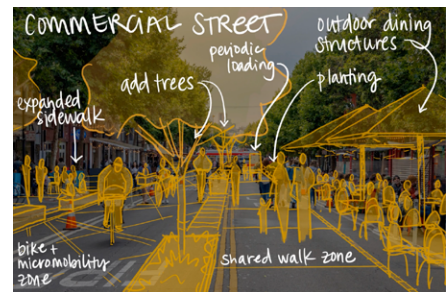
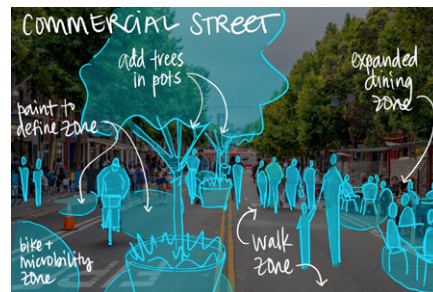
<sup>1</sup> Lizzie Johnson, “San Francisco 1st City in Nation With a Park 10-Minute Walk From Every Home,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 16, 2017, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/SF-1st-city-in-nation-with-a-park-10-minute-walk-11150987.php>

<sup>2</sup> Dan Federman, “San Francisco Is a Car-First City,” *Medium*, August 30, <https://medium.com/@dfed/breaking-down-san-franciscos-commitment-to-transit-dfc1331426d3>



During the pandemic, San Francisco's Shared Spaces program gave the city the opportunity to turn its commercial streets into places for people. Could it go even further and reimagine commercial streets as promenades for pedestrians and bikes? Valencia Street could take the current programs one step further in the short term, by eliminating cars and using tree planters and painted pavement to delineate an expanded dining zone, a pedestrian promenade and a dedicated bike and micro-mobility path. In the longer term, the planted zone becomes permanent, the painted pavement is replaced with pavers and the dining area is made more permeable with large-scale canopies instead of temporary enclosed shelters.

Photo by Sergio Ruiz, animation by Leah Chambers



In this report, we explore this emerging vision of San Francisco's streets, using the Shared Spaces and Slow Streets programs as bellwethers for what may be ahead. We subscribe to the idea put forth by Rebecca Solnit, after studying the 1989 earthquake and other disasters: "In the suspension of the usual order and the failure of most systems, we are free to live and act another way."<sup>3</sup> This report considers what this "other way" might look like, outlining a vision for city streets that proposes:

- Thriving commercial corridors supported by vibrant streets and public places
- Residential streets that are safe, flexible and joyful
- A holistic perspective that sees the street grid as a network helping people reach places quickly and safely while imposing minimal cost on others and the environment
- An ongoing process that responds to feedback and evolves to meet each community's unique needs

<sup>3</sup> Solnit, Rebecca, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*, Penguin, 2010.

Above all, this is a vision for streets as an equitable civic asset. More than simply a space to drive through, streets can be places where public life happens for everyone. Equitably distributing the benefits of this asset will require valuing the health of communities as much as the speed and convenience of cars. It will also require examining the fundamental flaws built into the existing system that prevent lower-income communities from taking advantage of programs such as Shared Spaces and Slow Streets.

To support this larger vision, this report captures the lessons learned from Shared Spaces and Slow Streets and puts forth 18 recommendations in four strategy categories:

**Strategy 1:****Build out a comprehensive and resilient network.**

Recommendation 1: Set a bigger and bolder vision.

Recommendation 2: Create a rapid response network.

Recommendation 3: Don't pilot, iterate.

Recommendation 4: Deploy Shared Spaces as neighborhood parks and plazas.

Recommendation 5: Prioritize Shared Spaces in curb management.

Recommendation 6: Develop maintenance strategies for a new class of street functions/structures.

Recommendation 7: Encourage flexible design to promote alternative street uses.

**Strategy 2:****Enhance the prototyping and feedback loop.**

Recommendation 8: Establish a holistic set of metrics and start tracking.

Recommendation 9: Do not return to business as usual.

Recommendation 10: Build a joyful street culture.

**Strategy 3:****Develop equitable and sustainable funding sources.**

Recommendation 11: Dedicate funding for higher-quality streets.

Recommendation 12: Continue to disperse funding through community-based organizations in the short term.

Recommendation 13: Address liability to allow innovation.

Recommendation 14: Reinstate Sunday parking meters.

**Strategy 4:****Streamline the process to the fullest extent possible.**

Recommendation 15: Ensure the permit for Shared Spaces remains simple and predictable.

Recommendation 16: Establish a Shared Spaces storefront.

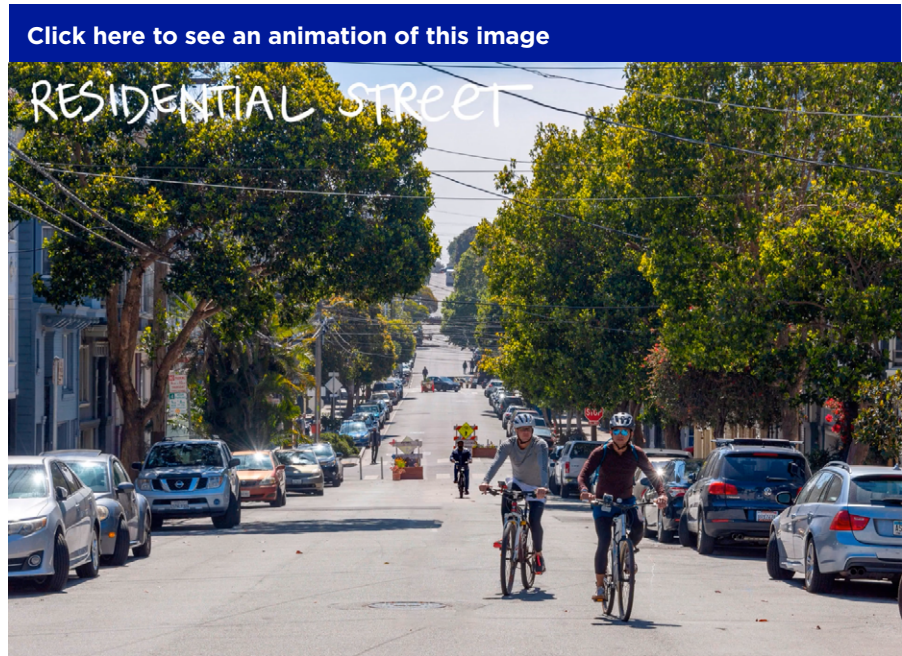
Recommendation 17: Lower the barriers for communities to activate their streets.

Recommendation 18: Staff up for permanent programs.

Collectively, the strategies in this document represent the possibilities of a fully utilized street network that connects a dense web of civic assets with a vibrant public life. They show what's possible when our streets reflect the potential of the future rather than the constraints of the past.

San Francisco's Slow Streets program has shown how neighborhood streets could become community spaces for play, gathering and safer walking and biking. What if the city took this transformation further and reduced the amount of space for cars by half, making the other half truly car-free? These changes can start today with paint, potted trees and moveable seating. Then, as it becomes clear which locations and designs work best, the city can invest further in making these solutions permanent.

Photo by Sergio Ruiz, animation by Leah Chambers





## Chapter 1

# Two Key Programs Transform the Streets

Faced with a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic, San Francisco launched the programs Shared Spaces and Slow Streets as a nimble response to the economic and recreational needs raised by a time of unprecedented social distancing. Shared Spaces enabled restaurants to use parking spaces for outdoor dining and shopping experiences (as well as some arts programs), and Slow Streets limited traffic on some residential streets to facilitate more pedestrian and bicycle use. In SPUR's view, the programs' success ranged far beyond their immediate goals: Shared Spaces and Slow Streets showed what is possible when San Francisco streets become places for living rather than just for driving or parking.

The research and engagement process to inform this paper kicked off in April 2021, when Shared Spaces and Slow Streets were considered temporary programs. SPUR developed a cross-sector task force that included government officials, business leaders, community groups and urban designers to help the team identify opportunities and barriers for reimagining city streets. We also hosted two public workshops specifically on Shared Spaces and Slow Streets to better understand how these programs work from a user perspective. The insights and recommendations provided in this report have been informed by these workshops, conversations and interviews.

## Shared Spaces Showed San Franciscans How to Have a Vibrant Street Life

**With the Shared Spaces program, restaurants can create outdoor dining experiences by making use of city sidewalks and streets.**

Photo courtesy San Francisco Planning





In June 2020, Mayor Breed created the temporary program Shared Spaces, allowing businesses or groups of businesses to occupy the sidewalks, parking lanes and even entire streets fronting their premises. Under the program, retailers can display and sell goods and offer services, and restaurants can place tables and chairs to offer outdoor dining. The program also waives city fees associated with such street uses in order to ease the economic burden on businesses and allow some employees to return to work.

Shared Spaces has been particularly beneficial to the restaurant industry, long a thriving element of San Francisco's economy and culture, with food being one of the city's greatest cultural exports and imports. Indeed, San Francisco stands out as a restaurant city: It has the most Michelin Stars for a city of its size,<sup>4</sup> and some estimate that there are more restaurants per capita here than in any other North American city.<sup>5</sup> Restaurants play a major role in the city's neighborhoods, especially its immigrant communities.

The pandemic also worsened existing challenges for the retail business. Before COVID-19, brick-and-mortar retailers were struggling to compete with online retailers, and the most successful were those that put an emphasis on an in-person consumer experience. When the pandemic required social distancing and eliminated indoor services, it was difficult — if not impossible — for many retailers and restaurants to pivot to an online or delivery model. Many closed completely to avoid the risks of exposure to their staff and customers, as well as the risk of experimenting with a completely new business model.

By enabling businesses to convert on-street, mostly metered parking spaces into a socially distanced outdoor experience, Shared Spaces allowed many restaurants and retail stores to keep their doors open and keep staff employed, while also offering a safer environment for employees and customers.

Shared Spaces also helped San Francisco do something it had never embraced before: create a vibrant outdoor dining scene. Despite the cool, foggy climate — and with the help of wind barriers and outdoor heaters — San Franciscans found that they enjoy outdoor dining and the life it brings to city streets. As the city heads toward recovery and more restaurants open up, the streets have filled with people dining, walking and looking toward brighter days.

To date, the Shared Spaces program has been a great success. As of July 2021, businesses have submitted 2,468 applications for Shared Spaces. In the May 2021 Economic Impact Report<sup>6</sup> for the program, the Office of the Controller stated that “parklets or Shared Spaces lead to significantly higher revenues for the businesses that invest in them.” This statement is further supported by Bloomberg's May 2021 study<sup>7</sup> showing increased consumer behavior in car-free zones. For example, San Francisco's Valencia Street was closed in sections to car traffic four nights a week from July to December 2020, and eateries on Valencia saw 18% more consumer interest on car-free days

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4 Sarah Feldman, “Top U.S. Cities for Michelin Restaurants,” *Statista*, December 4, 2018, <https://www.statista.com/chart/16308/michelin-restaurant-us/>

5 Paula Forbes, “Here Are the Most Restaurant- and Bar-Dense U.S. Cities,” *Eater*, August 1, 2012, <https://www.eater.com/2012/8/1/6559451/here-are-the-most-restaurant-and-bar-dense-us-cities>

6 City of San Francisco, Office of the Controller. Office of Economic Analysis. Shared Spaces Program: Economic Impact Report. May 24, 2021.

7 Linda Poon, “The Business Case for Car-Free Streets,” *Bloomberg*, May 11, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2021-05-11/citylab-daily-the-business-case-for-car-free-streets>

than at the start of the pandemic. This could be because the loss of a limited number of parking spaces did not meaningfully limit parking access to customers who drove or that there were fewer such customers for most businesses than customers who walked, biked or used public transit. Alternatively, it might be that Shared Spaces expanded foot traffic in the block, offsetting any loss of access for customers who drive.

While the program has been largely successful in many neighborhoods in San Francisco (such as Valencia Street, the Castro and Japantown), Shared Spaces has not been adopted as widely in lower-income areas. SPUR's interviews suggest that the cost to build these outdoor dining spaces, as well as to operate and maintain them, has been the chief obstacle. We also heard that districts with a wide adoption rate for Shared Spaces tend to have a community-based organization, community business district or Business Improvement District (BID) that has contributed to paying for construction, maintenance and/or liability insurance. Those areas that have underfunded community-based organizations or that do not participate in a BID have likely struggled with navigating the permitting and application process and absorbing the additional costs. Transforming streets in a permanent way will require addressing these inequities.

Due to the popularity of the program, in March 2021 Mayor Breed and the city's Economic Recovery Task Force announced their intention to make Shared Spaces permanent. As a temporary program tied to an emergency authorization, without further legislative action it would have shut down once the state of emergency was lifted. Instead, in July 2021, the city's Board of Supervisors passed legislation that ensures the program and its various types of outdoor usage are available on a permanent basis.

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## Shared Spaces Legislation

In July 2021, legislation officially integrated the Shared Spaces program into the Administrative, Public Works, Transportation and Police Code, transitioning it from temporary to permanent.

### What are the goals of the legislation?

The permanent version of the program aims to carry forward the streamlined permit process, encourage arts and culture, and better balance commercial activities with the public space and transportation demands of the recovering economy. Revised design and operating regulations go into effect for preexisting operators on January 1, 2022, which gives these operators time to apply for the new permit and make any essential changes to ensure access for people with disabilities and emergency responders.

The legislation was developed in coordination with multiple city agencies and stakeholders, including the Planning Department, the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA), the Department of Public Works (DPW), the Fire Department, the Police Department, the Entertainment Commission, the Mayor's Office on Disability, the Economic Recovery Task Force, the Board of Supervisors, commercial business districts, merchant associations, the Small Business Commission, the Planning Commission and public space and mobility advocates.

The legislation's goals are to:

1. Consolidate the permit process, streamlining it for permittees and creating a single, one-stop permit portal.
2. Prioritize equity and inclusion by focusing city resources on communities most impacted by historical disparities in funding. Ensure that the needs of the disabled community are accommodated.<sup>8</sup>
3. Phase the implementation of the program with economic conditions so that businesses have time to adapt to the new permit process.
4. Encourage arts, culture and entertainment activities by carrying forward the Just Add Music (JAM) permit (which ensures safer outdoor entertainment and amplified sound activity).
5. Ensure that the policies of the city programs Transit First and Vision Zero remain priorities.<sup>9</sup> Balance Shared Spaces occupancies with loading, short-term parking, micro-mobility needs (such as bikes, electric scooters, electric skateboards and other small-range lightweight vehicles) and other curbside functions. Encourage merchants on the same block to share spaces.
6. Maintain public access by requiring every Shared Space to provide public access when not in commercial use and provide a seating opportunity during daytime hours.
7. Implement an efficient permit review and approvals process with a clearly defined 30-day timetable to align with Prop. H requirements. (Prop. H, also referred to as the Save Our Small

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<sup>8</sup> City and County of San Francisco, "Make Your Shared Space Accessible," <https://sf.gov/information/make-your-shared-space-accessible>

<sup>9</sup> For a description of Transit First, which aims to prioritize public transit, see <https://www.sfmta.com/transit-first-policy>. For a description of Vision Zero, whose goal is to reduce traffic deaths to zero, see <https://www.visionzerosf.org/>

Business Initiative, shifts the approval action for many small-business uses from Conditional Use authorization granted by the Planning Commission at a public hearing to an over-the-counter administrative approval.)

8. Create clear public input procedures to encourage collaboration between neighbors and merchants.
9. Coordinate enforcement by a single agency with a “single bill of health” that will be easy for operators to understand.

### **Who can use this program?**

- This program is intended for public or private entities to create publicly accessible, programmable gathering spaces on a street, sidewalk or city lot that can support businesses or activate public life.
- Any person or entity may apply for a Shared Space in the roadway, sidewalk or along the curb. Requests for Shared Spaces on city lots can only be made by an agency, nonprofit or public entity.

### **How does it work?**

- The Shared Spaces legislation creates several categories of permitting: city-owned lots, roadways, sidewalks, parking lanes and private open spaces (like side and rear yards).
- The applicant submits an application for the space that includes a plan for the design, maintenance and programming of the space.
- The requests are reviewed and approved by the core city agencies — a coordinated group led by the Planning Department, which also includes the DPW, SFMTA, Real Estate Division, Fire Department, Department of Public Health and the Entertainment Commission.
- The permits have an initial term of one, two or five years based on the type of Shared Space. They may be renewed for additional terms.

### **How is this different from Parklets?**

- This Shared Spaces legislation incorporates the Parklets program, which predated the pandemic.
- While parklets were required to be fully open to the public, Shared Spaces can combine space reserved for commercial use with some public seating. However, all Shared Spaces are required to be open to the public while they are not being activated for commercial uses. Similar to the Parklets program, all physical elements of the design must be removable at the end of the permit term, returning the space to its previous condition.
- Parklet permit holders must apply for a new Shared Spaces permit before the expiration of their term if they want to continue using their space.



**How is this different from a Café Tables and Chairs permit?**

- The Shared Spaces program now incorporates the Café Tables and Chairs permit, which predated the pandemic.
- While the original Café Tables and Chairs permit was restricted to adding dining furniture directly adjacent to a business's building or property line, this legislation expands the use of outdoor dining to other parts of the sidewalk as well.
- Similar to the Café Tables and Chairs permit, fixtures and furnishings must be removable.

**What concerns have been raised about Shared Spaces?**

- Meter revenues constitute a large portion of the SFMTA's funding, so the loss of such revenue (which occurs when Shared Spaces takes away metered parking spaces) could impact the city's ability to fund and provide consistent, high-quality public transit.
- The Fire Department has expressed concerns that Shared Spaces structures may block first-responder access to buildings, specifically hydrant connections on buildings. The department also warns about the dangers of propane heaters within wood structures that may catch fire easily.
- When Shared Spaces structures occupy streets, the risk of vehicle collisions with these structures rises.
- As mentioned earlier, lower-income businesses, particularly in historically disadvantaged neighborhoods, are less likely to invest in Shared Spaces and may not be able to afford permit fees if they increase.
- The Board of Supervisors has had extensive discussions about accessibility concerns and how to handle noncompliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
- If business owners refuse to indemnify the city against risk, it will leave the city vulnerable to lawsuits for injury liability or ADA noncompliance. There is a high cost to litigation, even when lawsuits are meritless.

## Slow Streets Proved the Appeal of Using City Streets in Different Ways



Residential streets closed to through traffic offer easier, more enjoyable routes for pedestrians and cyclists to navigate.

Photo by Sergio Ruiz

The pandemic brought a drastic reduction in Muni ridership, and as a result service was dramatically limited or cut altogether, narrowing mobility options in the city, particularly for those who relied on public transit. At the same time, San Franciscans began to suffer from a dearth of COVID-safe recreational opportunities. The city's shelter-in-place order had mandated that residents stay close to home and go outside only when essential. Indoor services, including gyms, were closed. Without access to these spaces, people turned to their nearby streets and open spaces for recreation, social interaction and mental health. It quickly became clear that sidewalks and local parks did not provide enough space to meet the demand while also offering enough room for people to maintain social distance.

In response to this need, the SFMTA implemented Slow Streets, a program that's designed to limit vehicle through traffic on certain residential streets and encourage slower speeds so that people could travel and play on foot, bicycle, wheelchair, scooter or skateboard. Local traffic is allowed, enabling residents to drive to their homes or park on the street and receive deliveries and city services. But cars have to yield to everyone else.

The Slow Streets program has transformed the way San Franciscans use their streets, opening up truly safe recreation and mobility options in people's front yards. SPUR has heard many stories of streets being used by children learning to ride bikes and scooters, friends gathering for outdoor happy hours and musicians playing for their neighbors. Above all, city residents conveyed their sense that once the danger of cars was removed, the streets became a place for public life to happen — at a time when they badly needed to feel connected to their neighbors and communities.

Throughout the city, nearly 30 corridors have been implemented as Slow Streets. SFMTA surveys have found that the program is popular with respondents. However, Slow Streets was rolled out on an ad hoc basis, with many of the traffic-restricted roads lacking connection to the greater transportation network and failing to offer proper wayfinding for people to navigate from place to place. The SFMTA is currently working through a community process that proposes to expand the program into additional neighborhoods but has not yet addressed the lack of network connections or wayfinding in any systematic way.

During SPUR's workshops, some members of the public spoke about their struggles with the program or the speed with which it was implemented. Many residents did not understand how to navigate their city streets once the closures made their commute to work or school more challenging. SPUR also heard from members of the senior community who expressed support for the program but argued for keeping certain streets open for driving when mobility challenges make it impossible to walk or bike safely.

## The Lowdown on Slow Streets

### What do Slow Streets look like?

- Implementation of Slow Streets varies by neighborhood, but the program generally includes signage and barricades placed at each intersection along the corridor to discourage through vehicle traffic and provide roadway space for people who are walking and biking.
- The SFMTA worked with navigation service providers like Google Maps and Apple Maps so that the map applications would show these streets as closed to through traffic, automatically rerouting vehicle trips around Slow Streets.
- Residents and businesses continue to have access to driveways, curbs, services and deliveries.
- While Slow Streets are prioritized for pedestrians and cyclists, they are still meant to be corridors for movement, not social gatherings (like block parties or cookouts).
- Slower cars and less vehicle through traffic means calmer, quieter, safer streets for residents.

**How are the locations chosen?**

- The streets were initially chosen to supplement reduced or suspended Muni routes while providing bicycle and pedestrian access to essential services. Many of these streets run parallel to other major streets and transit routes.
- Only low-volume residential streets can be turned into Slow Streets. Streets with traffic signals, steep grades, one-way traffic, Muni lines, commercial loading zones and emergency service corridors are not ideal candidates for Slow Streets.

**How does the process work?**

- The SFMTA manages the Slow Streets program, planning and implementing the corridors throughout the city. Potential future Slow Streets will be approved by the SFMTA board.

**What concerns have been raised about Slow Streets?**

- Residents of Slow Streets sometimes feel unwelcome by pedestrians and cyclists using the streets. Some cases of harassment have been reported. The rules have sometimes seemed unclear to residents, especially the appropriate speed for cars and bicycles.
- Early barricades for Slow Streets often blew over in the wind. (The SFMTA is in the process of replacing them with more durable solutions.)
- DPW raised concerns over the cost, complexity and skill level required to maintain an expanded amount of streetscape and an expanded palette of materials.
- Some of the Slow Streets do not connect to other bike or recreation infrastructure, preventing them from reaching their potential as Green Connectors.<sup>10</sup>
- Slow Streets on hills have been less successful (for example, Arkansas Street in Potrero Hill) as they are not as easy and/or pleasant to use for recreation.
- Some drivers, including those with mobility challenges, feel frustrated by limited access to streets they previously used as through streets.

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<sup>10</sup> The Green Connections program aims to increase access to parks, open spaces and waterfronts by making streets safer and more pleasant to travel via walking, biking and other forms of active transportation. See: <https://sfplanning.org/project/green-connections>



## Chapter 2

# Continuing the Transformation Is Critical

As San Francisco contemplates how these changes to its streets have shaped residents' experience of the city over the course of the pandemic, it has the opportunity to integrate the lessons from experimental programs and build a version of its streets that better serves the needs of the community and the city's aspirations. Would San Franciscans rather have parking spaces for cars or spaces that celebrate their diverse identities? Should the city measure successful streets by how quickly they move cars through neighborhoods or how well they serve as places for walking, biking, gathering and play? Streets must be safe for activity and recreation while also allowing people to get to where they need to go with ease.

The imperative for change goes beyond safer streets and a better quality of public life. The most recent International Panel on Climate Change report confirmed that the world is locked into the impacts of climate change: the only chance to avoid the most devastating effects is to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Those findings make it clearer than ever that humankind must find ways to reduce car usage. At the same time, San Francisco's sustainable mode share (the proportion of trips made by walking, biking and taking transit) has stagnated — in 2019, it was at 46%, compared with the original goal of 58% by 2018.<sup>11</sup> Even forward-thinking cities like San Francisco are not making nearly enough progress building the right infrastructure to encourage people to use environmentally friendly transportation options.

The pandemic has shown that unshackling government from its own rules can allow for big, transformative change. It has also shown that in times of crisis, the cost of doing nothing is greater than the cost of trying something new. Now that San Franciscans have glimpsed the ability of government to take action, have seen the potential of streets as vibrant neighborhood places and have felt the benefits of these changes, the city cannot go backward. It must carry this temporary momentum on to permanent transformation.

## Necessary Paradigm Shifts to Make the Vision a Reality

The changes seen on San Francisco's streets during the pandemic did not happen through a normal planning process. Emergency powers granted to the mayor enabled overnight changes that would otherwise have taken decades or may never have happened at all. These changes were intended to facilitate social distancing and sustain small businesses, but they also provided space for new decision-making structures to emerge. The emergency powers will fade alongside the pandemic, but the paradigm shifts they initiated should be emulated as the city continues the transformation of its streets.

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<sup>11</sup> City and County of San Francisco, "Non-Private Auto Mode Share," <https://sfgov.org/scorecards/transportation/non-private-auto-mode-share>



**1. Equitable investment:** If the pandemic revealed new value in city streets, it also exposed how that value is not distributed equally. Wealthy neighborhoods and commercial corridors benefitted from numerous Slow Streets and a plethora of new parklets, while investment in similar street improvements lagged in underserved neighborhoods. Part of this discrepancy can be traced to a longstanding practice, in San Francisco and other cities, of shifting the responsibility for streets away from city agencies and toward private individuals and organizations. Community-based groups and individual businesses have taken steps toward making street improvements, filling in the gaps of stewardship by paying for higher-quality materials and better maintenance. These private contributions can be admirable and effective, but they rely on continued community engagement and highlight deep inequities in how resources are distributed. Investments in safety and street improvements are often absent in the neighborhoods where they are most needed. Going forward, it will be important to recognize the systemic inequity at play in how cities invest in streets — from planning to community engagement to a reliance on private funding — and make sure that the government can equitably fund streets. Treating streets as an asset worthy of enhanced and sustained investment will require a reorientation of priorities. In light of the pandemic, the value of doing so should be clearer than ever.



**2. The power of iteration:** One of the most welcome developments during the pandemic was the way government agencies in San Francisco came together to quickly implement, troubleshoot and problem-solve for the benefit of their communities. The small size, low price tag and reversible nature of interventions such as Shared Spaces and Slow Streets meant that there were few downsides to experimenting and iterating. This process revealed that it's much easier and quicker to get meaningful community feedback on something that's already up and running than on a concept that only exists on paper. The conversation shifts from “yes or no” to “how do we make this better?” This reframing ensures that perfect does not become the enemy of good; rather, good simply becomes one of the many stages that lead to greatness. For pandemic-era programs to be successful over the long run, cities need to continue collaborative iteration and participatory decision-making beyond the end of the emergency orders.



**3. Nimble leadership:** Agency leaders showed remarkable tenacity and flexibility during the pandemic. Forced to play unfamiliar roles, many city leaders had to act quickly in order to respond to the public health crisis and its effects on neighborhoods and businesses throughout San Francisco. The urgency of the situation generated excitement for rapid prototyping and the testing of new ideas and concepts in

response to the concerns constituents were sharing. Leaders responded more swiftly to lessons learned and became more communicative and collaborative in the search for solutions. Integrating iteration, direct communication, ongoing feedback and highly personal outreach into the everyday processes of governance nurtured civic trust that benefitted these bold visions.



**4. The prioritizing of collective benefits:** The urgency of the pandemic forced city departments to focus on the larger public good rather than on their own narrow agency missions. The heightened risk of *not* taking action spurred decisions in favor of collective benefits and made it easier politically to avoid obstacles posed by a single metric or vocal minority. The pandemic also necessitated a streamlined and simplified permitting process, minimized contradictory rulings from different departments and empowered decision-makers to use their discretion about using public space for public benefit, without the pressure of having to eliminate all potential hazards or liability first. Perhaps most importantly, the urgency of the moment blunted the power of individuals opposed to change to wield veto power over decisions that benefited the broader community.



**5. A holistic view of public space:** The pandemic significantly shifted ideas of what people need from their public spaces and highlighted how streets can meaningfully provide a full range of benefits — from mobility to economic value to opportunities for recreation. In light of this disaster, mental and physical health became more valuable than through traffic, and the chance for businesses to operate outdoors became more important than parking spaces. As cities move out of the pandemic, they should continue to consider the full range of benefits when evaluating how streets are used. The way a street contributes to safety, community, economic recovery, the environment and collective health should matter as much as its ability to move cars quickly. A holistic view of streetscape design seeks balance among competing interests — emergency vehicle response times are weighed against the consequences of traffic violence, and the ease of parking is weighed against the comfort levels of pedestrians and cyclists as well as against the economic benefit of vibrant commercial corridors. Traditionally, auto access has superseded other concerns, but a future-oriented, holistic approach would elevate other needs and prioritize a sense of place.

## Chapter 3

# Strategies and Recommendations

Based on our outreach and research, SPUR proposes the following recommendations to build on the momentum of these pandemic projects and transform San Francisco's streets for generations to come.

### STRATEGY 1:

## Build out a comprehensive and resilient network.

The Slow Streets and Shared Spaces programs are the result of bold actions made in response to a once-in-a-lifetime public health disaster. Yet in order to make San Francisco truly resilient in the face of future disasters — and to support small business, promote job growth and reduce transportation-related carbon emissions — innovation strategies like these need to be more common. Embracing bold action will require a clear vision and even clearer quality-of-life benefits. Shared Spaces and Slow Streets provide a glimpse of what those benefits might look like, but to create the buy-in necessary to ensure a sustainable future, the city will need a comprehensive street network that is sophisticated yet flexible enough to be shaped by neighbors, businesses and community organizations.

### Recommendation 1:

#### Set a bigger and bolder vision.

*Who's responsible: SFMTA*

The current network of streets is designed almost exclusively for cars. Where the city has made improvements for cyclists and pedestrians, they have mostly been minor: painted bike lanes at the edges of car lanes, bulb-outs at intersections or narrow strips of sparsely planted medians. A reimagined network that is truly designed for cyclists, pedestrians, transit and nature would require major transformations like moving curbs to widen sidewalks or removing them entirely; tearing up asphalt and providing large areas of healthy soil for planting; and creating safe, car-free corridors for cyclists, public transit and other sustainable modes to travel quickly across the city.

Fully realizing the potential of city streets should start with a comprehensive view of the street grid — one that aligns existing plans with a strategy to allow cross-town travel on different routes for different modes, expand low-traffic streets and enable effective emergency response. Such a network would create a safer, more efficient and higher-quality experience of the public realm, with more opportunities for indoor life to extend out into the streets. This network could include bus lanes for every bus route with a frequency of 10 minutes or less; Slow Streets connecting every school, library, park and hospital; and a network of continuous protected bike lanes linking every major commercial corridor. Where today San Francisco has tens of miles of bus lanes, bike lanes and Slow Streets, it should lay out a plan for networks with hundreds of miles.

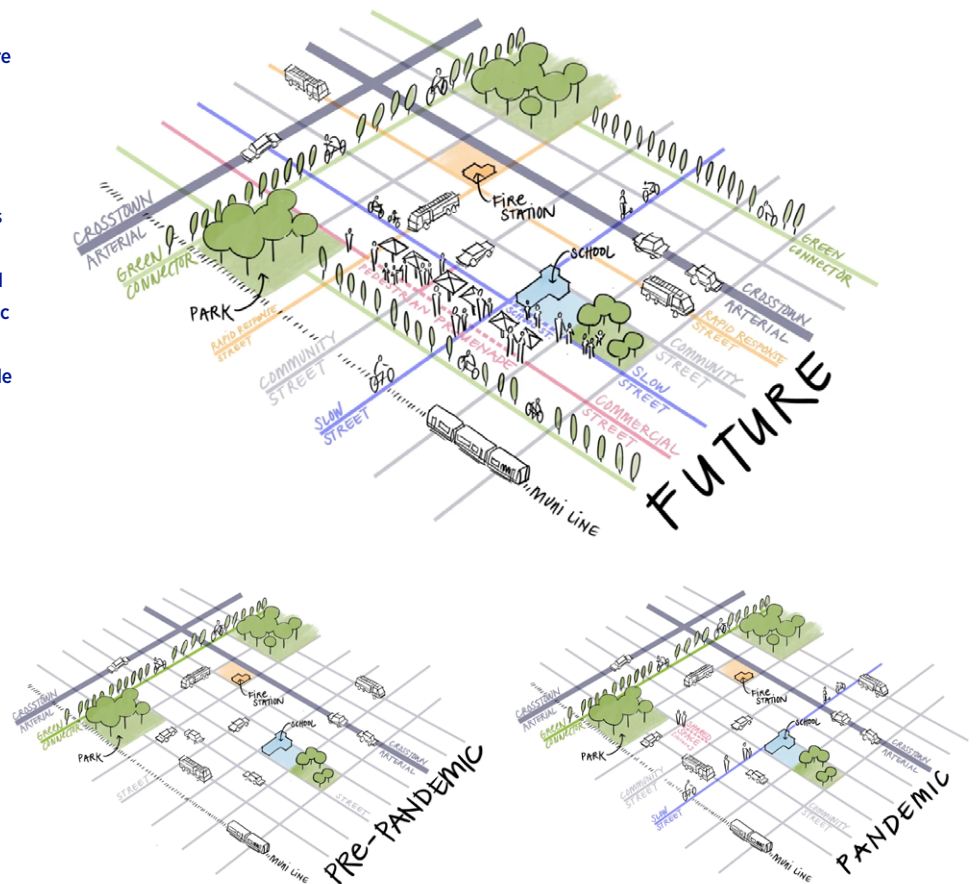
As a first step, the SFMTA should continue to develop, improve and expand the city’s palette of car-light streets, including the Green Connections and Slow Streets typologies already outlined in San Francisco’s General Plan.<sup>12</sup> These streets must then be organized to form a network that prioritizes different modes and relates more directly to land use patterns, such as proximity to parks, schools, health care centers and jobs. Most streets in Golden Gate Park should be car-free, and the city should explore making streets car-free by default in other major parks. Improvements should be implemented as temporary, quick and cheap projects along entire corridors — not expensive, single-block pilot projects. Building on the methods learned from implementing Slow Streets, the SFMTA should continue studying and refining these corridors until major capital investments can be made to make them permanent. Slow Streets should also be an integral and connected part of the SFMTA’s broader mobility goals to increase pedestrian and bike activity. They present an opportunity to create a true “15-minute neighborhood,” where people can safely access their basic, day-to-day needs within a 15-minute walk or bike ride (“true” because, in many places, a grocery or corner store may be less than 15 minutes away but is still not easy to reach due to a lack of continuous bike lanes or sidewalks).

Achieving the comprehensive street network will require deep collaboration and a series of near-term interventions. The next recommendations under Strategy 1 are designed to provide a path forward for policymakers and agency staffers.

Creating a 21st-century streetscape will require not only differentiating between various needs but also imagining new ways to link uses together. Green Connections could link cyclists in a safe, continuous network to city parks while also acting as ecological corridors between patches of habitat. Slow Streets could connect schools, parks and libraries and could be intermittently closed to vehicle traffic to create outdoor extensions of these civic spaces. Shared Spaces could expand to include markets, pop-up plazas and performance spaces. Emergency vehicles could use a “rapid response network” of streets designed to allow fire trucks to move quickly through the city, reducing emergency vehicle access requirements on most streets and potentially improving response times.

Animation by Leah Chambers and Alice An

[Click here to see an animation of this image](#)



12 San Francisco Planning Department, *San Francisco General Plan*, “Transportation Element, Objective 18,” [https://generalplan.sfplanning.org/14\\_Transportation.htm#TRA\\_VC\\_18](https://generalplan.sfplanning.org/14_Transportation.htm#TRA_VC_18)



## **Recommendation 2: Create a rapid response network.**

*Who's responsible: SFMTA, San Francisco Fire Department*

Requirements for emergency vehicle access are often at odds with good street design. Narrower lanes help to slow vehicles, but fire departments often require wider lanes for an emergency vehicle to be able to easily pass a fire truck with its outriggers (extra water lines) extended. Emergency vehicles could find other ways to go around the fire truck, but this might increase response times, which is the primary metric by which the fire department's success is measured.

As car-light streets become more common, emergency access may become more complicated. Fire trucks previously used some Slow Streets as frequent-response corridors but cannot safely continue to do so on a street designed to promote pedestrian activity and frustrate through traffic. Without access to fast and convenient routes to move through the city, emergency response times may increase.

Accordingly, the SFMTA should work with the San Francisco Fire Department to identify a rapid response network comprising a set of routes selected and designed to meet specific criteria for street width, signal priority and low vehicle queueing at intersections. This would move street design away from the current paradigm, in which every street must be designed for quick through access for fire trucks, and instead direct emergency response vehicles to routes that can be optimized for speed. Such a scheme would allow more streets to have flexibility in design and might even improve emergency response times.

### **Managing Fire Safety**

The Fire Department has a number of concerns around access to fighting fires. Effective firefighting requires the ability to access hydrants in streets and Fire Department connections on buildings, put down outriggers on trucks and maneuver trucks around each other at the scene of the response. Other cities have dealt with these challenges without sacrificing street design — for example by using smaller fire trucks, which don't require as much space to operate.

Before the pandemic, the San Francisco Fire Department was often unwilling to compromise on any of these requirements, arguing that fire response is so important to public safety it should trump all other considerations. But putting fire safety above all else is too reductive, especially in street design, where prioritizing fire safety can put pedestrians and cyclists at risk of death or serious injury and can harm small businesses by not allowing them to make use of the street. Those side effects also have significant public health implications.

### **Recommendation 3: Don't pilot, iterate.**

*Who's responsible: SFMTA*

One of the great successes of the Shared Spaces and Slow Streets programs is that they were expected to require iteration and change as time went on. The programs were rolled out quickly, and it was understood that the policies and requirements would need to be changed and updated in response to feedback and findings. Slow Streets, for example, initially used barriers that were frequently knocked over in the wind, so the SFMTA began slowly replacing them with more durable plastic bollards. Signage has evolved as the agency has learned more about what works or doesn't.

Contrast this with the bike lane pilot on Market Street, where the SFMTA implemented a block-long elevated bike lane with a variety of curb conditions along the one block. They watched to see how this intervention was used, but because it was so short, it didn't provide useful feedback about how it could work along an entire corridor. And because it was so capital-intensive, the agency didn't want to invest in a larger-scale version of the pilot.

The iterative approach on a city-wide scale is significantly different from a pilot approach. The city rolls out an idea quickly and widely, gathers feedback and makes adjustments until the idea is working. The temporary elements can be replaced with more permanent versions once the system has been tested. In the pilot approach, the city rolls out one capital-intensive project, one block at a time. The sponsoring agency doesn't learn much from it, and it has a limited benefit.

We recommend that the SFMTA move toward wide-scale tactical iterations of projects to try out new ideas and tune them to the needs of each place. Then, as interventions seem to be working well, replace the temporary elements with more lasting interim elements — for example, cones and barricades can be replaced with concrete planters. Once the intervention has been fully adopted and is functional, replace the interim elements with permanent ones: for example, trees planted in the ground, and higher-quality pavers to replace painted asphalt.

### **Recommendation 4: Deploy Shared Spaces as neighborhood parks and plazas.**

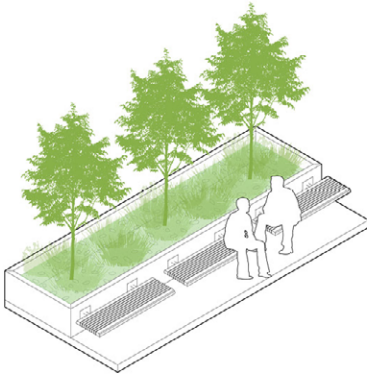
*Who's responsible: SFMTA, Mayor's Office*

When BIDs and merchants' associations created common seating areas during the pandemic, the benefits extended to the whole corridor. Restaurants that could not afford to build their own Shared Spaces could use these public areas directly, and other retailers benefited from the increased foot traffic. Especially in commercial areas with narrow sidewalks, these common spaces have also served to enhance the pedestrian experience, allowing people to enjoy being outside.

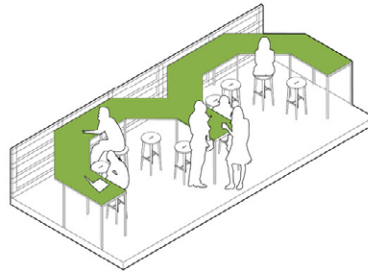
Commercial parklets are one way to create vibrancy, but many streets need places for people to sit and spend time without having to spend money. The SFMTA, the DPW and the Department of Parks and Recreation should work together to build and maintain noncommercial Shared Spaces on commercial and residential streets as a part of the city's overall open-space network. Examples could include picnic areas for grab-and-go dining, performance spaces, places for teens or seniors to sit with friends, outdoor workstations, playground parklets or community gardens.

What if parking spaces on retail streets and in neighborhoods could become playgrounds, community gardens or outdoor workspaces?

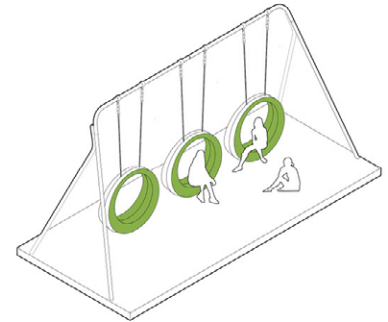
Illustration by Alice An



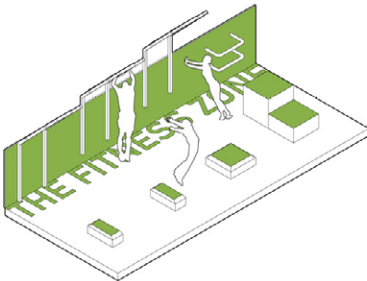
01\_PARKLET\_PLANTER WITH BENCH



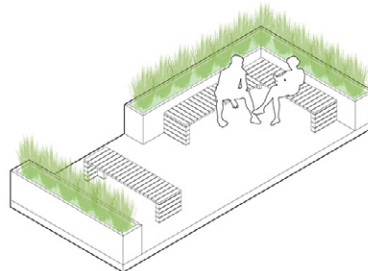
02\_PARKLET\_BAR SEATING



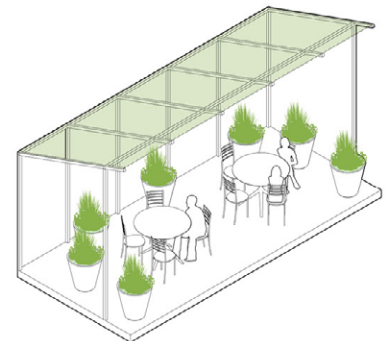
03\_PARKLET\_SWINGS



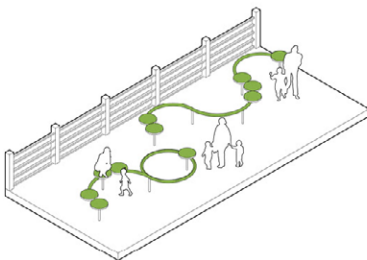
04\_PARKLET\_WORKOUT



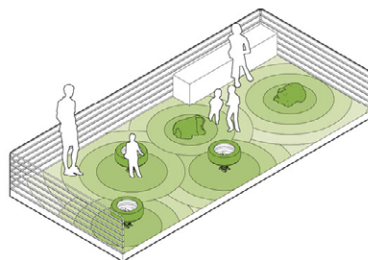
05\_PARKLET\_SEATING + PLANTERS



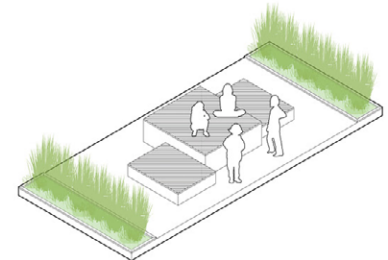
06\_PARKLET\_TABLES+CHAIRS



07\_PARKLET\_PLAYFUL SEATING



08\_PARKLET\_PLAYGROUND



09\_PARKLET\_TERRACE SEATING

### Recommendation 5: Prioritize Shared Spaces in curb management.

Who's responsible: SFMTA

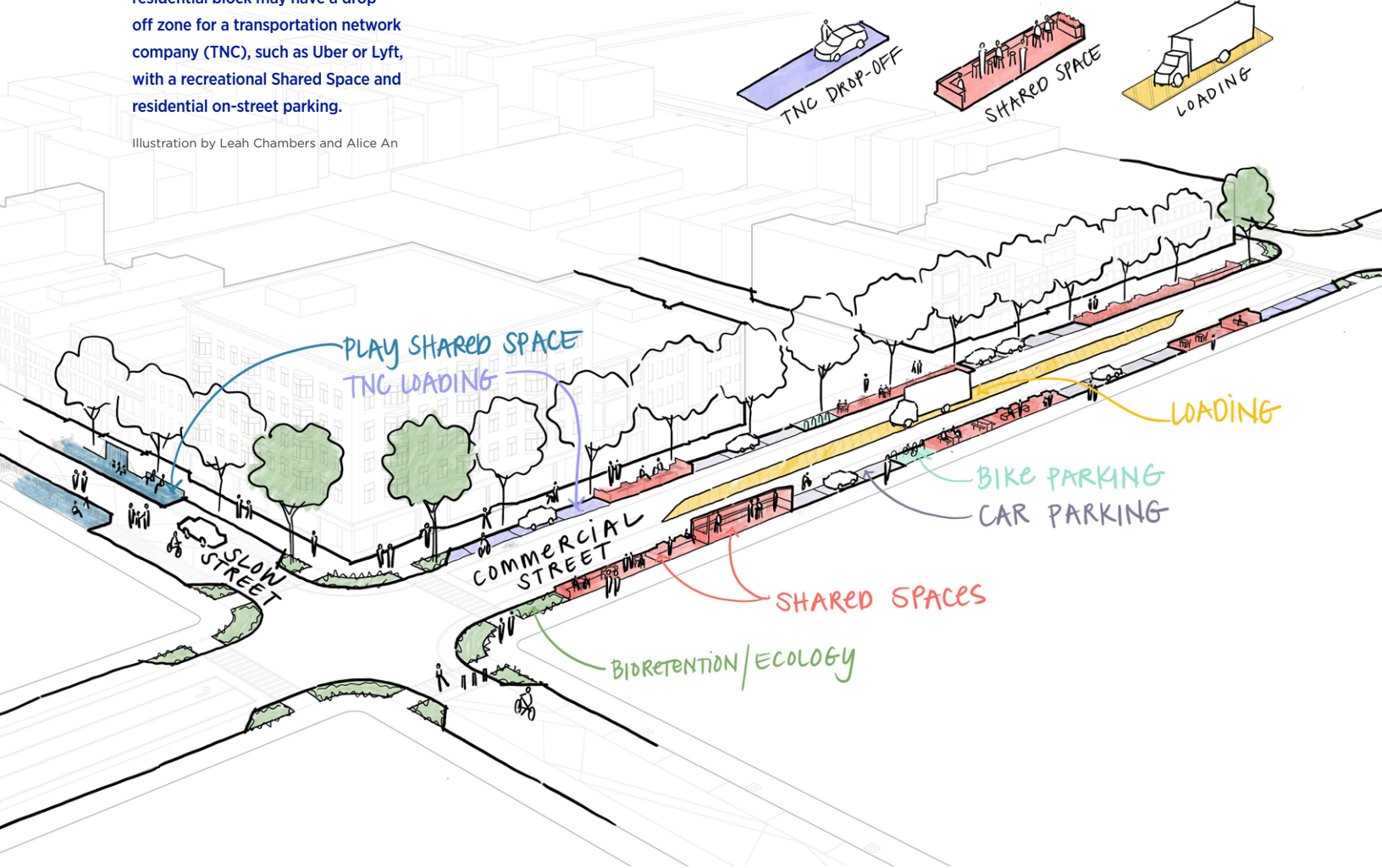
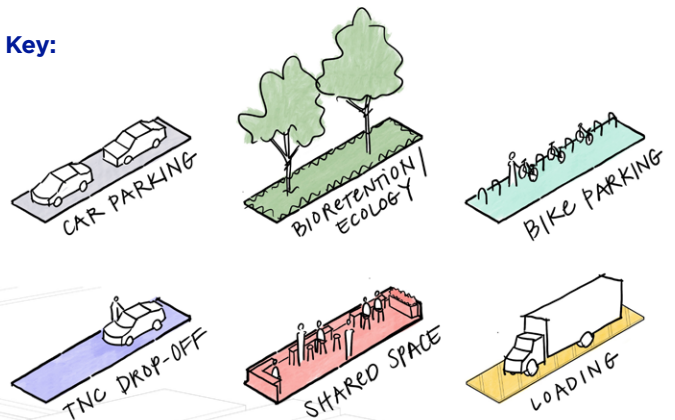
The SFMTA should identify and implement the strategic placement of curbside uses that prioritize the pedestrian and bicycle experience (see illustration on page TK). The agency has released a curb management plan, which seeks to inventory and prioritize the demand for curb space, but while car parking, passenger loading and deliveries are all important functions, a plan that puts these needs above the qualitative experience of the street isn't going far enough to transform streets into high-quality, livable places. As the curb management plan evolves, it should shift from car-centric to pedestrian- and bicyclist-centric.

A holistic curb management plan should begin with commercial corridors that are already actively using Shared Spaces and build toward a broader network where each block and district is optimized for a community's particular needs.

Each street should have a strategic and comprehensive array of street uses appropriate to that block. For example, one commercial block may have several Shared Spaces at the corners, with corresponding bike parking, car parking and loading zones. Another primarily residential block may have a drop-off zone for a transportation network company (TNC), such as Uber or Lyft, with a recreational Shared Space and residential on-street parking.

Illustration by Leah Chambers and Alice An

Key:



## **Recommendation 6: Develop maintenance strategies for a new class of street functions/ structures.**

*Who's responsible: DPW*

While each project could provide superior-quality materials and design at the outset, if the city is unable or unwilling to maintain that quality over time, the initial investment will be wasted. Currently, the Department of Public Works knows how to maintain concrete and asphalt, but as the range of materials that are used in the streets expands to suit more innovative projects, the DPW must develop the skills and technologies needed to keep these materials in optimal working order. The department also needs to find new ways to store a wider range of materials and deploy maintenance crews that have the necessary expertise for each job site.

We heard one example of a special kind of tile that was used for an installation, and then the extra tiles were lost. So, every time DPW needs to do a repair on that location, the agency has to special order the tile from Europe. We also heard how most maintenance crews are only trained to work with concrete or asphalt, so it's difficult to send out a crew that can perform maintenance on other materials, for example in the location that used tile.

DPW should develop its capacity for a higher standard of maintenance and craftsmanship through training and apprenticeships and should assemble multidisciplinary crews that can work with an expanded palette of materials. Technology such as GIS mapping can keep track of which materials are used on which streets and can easily identify ahead of time which trades will be needed for each job site. Logistics technology like QR codes and databases can help the department keep track of materials stored in various locations around the city, so they don't get lost.

## **Recommendation 7 Encourage flexible design to promote alternative street uses.**

*Who's responsible: SFMTA*

As the city works toward the vision, it's important to continue to refine current street design practices. Currently, Slow Streets are designed to limit vehicle activity on a particular road, which can cause confusion both for the driver of the vehicle and for the pedestrian walking in the street. Temporary barricades are placed at the ends of Slow Streets, which should prevent through traffic; however, many drivers choose to ignore these barriers and simply continue to drive through or even park on the street. The SFMTA should continue to develop practices for closing off streets to reduce such behavior and allow for different activities to take place on the road. In Melbourne, Australia, for example, the downtown district has installed retractable bollards that automatically pop up on high-use streets to allow for safe pedestrian activity during peak hours, such as lunchtime or while a street parade or outdoor event is happening.



**STRATEGY 2:**

## Enhance the prototyping and feedback loop.

Slow Streets and Shared Spaces are two unique programs for San Francisco in that they focus on rapid deployment followed by continual evaluation and iteration based on feedback. City programs typically function in the reverse, preparing a plan ahead of time and soliciting feedback on the concept before construction begins. Not only has this shift unlocked quick ways to make changes on city streets, it also has yielded more effective communication between the SFMTA and residents. Rather than getting bogged down in abstract questions and hard-to-understand plans, the SFMTA receives direct and specific feedback on how to improve designs on the ground.

While this has been an effective way to implement single projects, the city also must create forums for ongoing conversations about broader issues and bigger questions. Most of these conversations are currently happening when individual development proposals go out to communities, at which point bigger issues usually take over, preventing individual projects from moving forward. If San Francisco's city agencies want to have effective outreach, they should ensure that conversations take place at both the big-picture and tactical levels.

### **Recommendation 8: Establish a holistic set of metrics and start tracking.**

*Who's responsible: SFMTA, Planning Department*

The SFMTA has begun to track the use of Slow Streets and Shared Spaces through surveys, Vision Zero reports on traffic violence and the number of permits issued. The SFMTA and the Planning Department should work together to make sure the tracking metrics align with broader city goals related to equity, climate, transit-first mobility, economic recovery, health and quality of life.

At a minimum, key metrics could include counts of people by mode on Slow Streets versus on through streets (including demographics where possible), noise and air pollution levels, popularity and level of enjoyment, geographic distribution of resources and economic metrics — including incremental sales tax revenue and jobs generated. This data should be tracked and shared consistently so that decision-makers can easily move beyond anecdotal evidence and continue to make the case for the benefits of these changes.

We tend to perceive a street lined with parked cars — and more queuing at an intersection — as efficiently used and maybe even busy. Compare this with the same street closed to traffic, when many more people are using the street for gathering and walking. How should we measure successful streets?

A picture of Hayes Street in 2017 shows a seemingly “busy” street with six cars queuing at a stop sign and a pedestrian taking the risk of crossing the street illegally.

Photo by Sergio Ruiz



A picture of Hayes Street in 2021, when it was closed to vehicular traffic, shows at least 15 people using the space for dining and strolling.

Photo by Sergio Ruiz



## **Recommendation 9:** **Do not return to business as usual.**

*Who's responsible: SFMTA*

As it moves out of the pandemic, the city will tend to move back to a model of planning, soliciting feedback, soliciting more feedback, soliciting even more feedback and then eventually making big infrastructure investments. Instead, the SFMTA should shift more of its projects into an iterative mode, with a particular focus on small-scale but high-impact projects. The SFMTA's success at delivering large numbers of small but impactful projects during the pandemic is a notable contrast to the challenges it has had delivering large-scale projects like the Central Subway or Van Ness Bus Rapid Transit. If the agency is much better at delivering lots of little projects than a few big ones, then its planning should respond to that. The SFMTA's Quick Build program, for instance, is an effort to quickly implement pedestrian and bicycle safety improvements and offers a promising model for improving and evaluating the street network. Oakland's Essential Places program (see sidebar) is another example of an equitable approach to working with the community and involving community members in decision-making.

This is not to say that large-scale infrastructure projects should no longer be prioritized. Rather, on the path to final delivery, the city should be encouraging small test projects to engage people and gather key feedback to inform the final design. SPUR recognizes that there are significant constraints regarding iterative implementations and California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requirements, which regulate the environmental impact of a project. The city should evaluate these hurdles and determine how to integrate a more iterative approach within the constraints.

### **Oakland's Essential Places**

When Oakland rolled out its Slow Streets in response to the pandemic, the city found disparities in how neighborhoods were reacting to the program. The Slow Streets in wealthier, whiter neighborhoods tended to be received more favorably, whereas the Slow Streets in East Oakland (a lower-income neighborhood predominantly populated by residents of color) were less popular. Rather than withdrawing the program from East Oakland, representatives from the City of Oakland went to meet with residents to hear their concerns. The residents didn't dislike Slow Streets specifically, but they objected to the city's focus on this program when the neighborhood had a number of high-injury intersections that were of more immediate concern to residents.

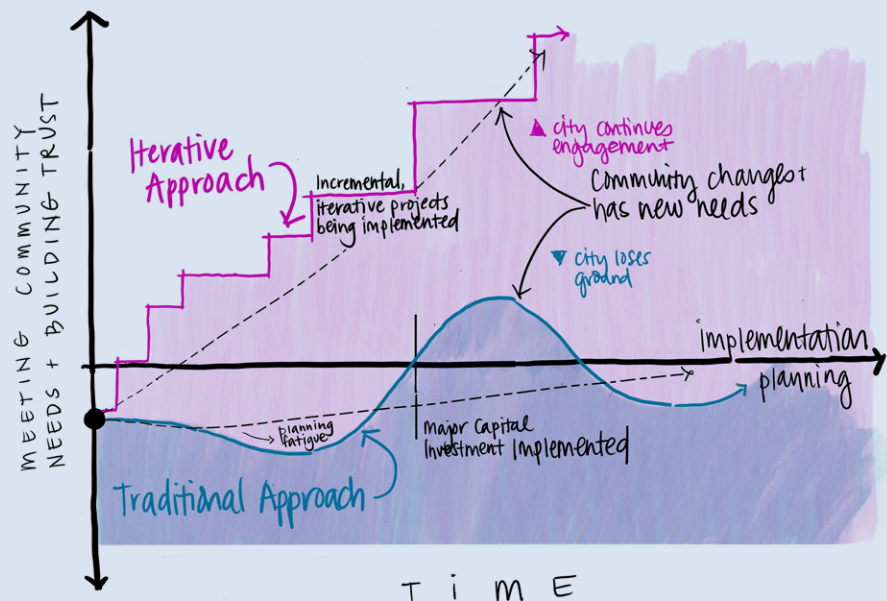
In response, the city launched the next phase of Slow Streets, called Essential Places, a program that worked with residents to identify intersection improvements and implemented Quick Build projects to slow traffic and improve pedestrian safety at those intersections. After each series of improvements was made, city staff went back to check on how they were working and what else needed to be improved.

In a matter of months, the most dangerous intersections had been made much safer and the pedestrian experience much improved. But perhaps most importantly, this iteration and participatory decision-making went a long way toward building greater trust between the community members and city government.

The key lesson learned from this experience was that communities benefit more from government intervention when a “yes or no” conversation about specific solutions shifts to the question, “How can we make this better?” It is also much easier for people to provide direct and meaningful feedback on something they can see and experience.

An iterative approach builds community trust more quickly than the traditional model of engaging communities around expensive, long-term capital improvements projects.

Illustration by Leah Chambers



**Recommendation 10:  
Build a joyful street culture.**

*Who's responsible: SFMTA, Recreation and Parks Department*

As San Francisco transforms its streets, it also transforms the norms that have typically applied to these spaces. Where it used to be normal for cars to drive over 30 miles an hour down a residential street regardless of the speed limit, Slow Streets expect drivers to slow down and yield to pedestrians and cyclists. Former through streets are now destinations, but merely putting up signs and barriers will not produce the necessary cultural shift. To create joyful, fun and safe streets, the city must proactively work to build that new culture.

San Francisco organizations have used Sunday Streets, block parties, the Prototyping Festival and Bike Parties to temporarily change the way people think about their streets. Events where people come together and use the streets and parklets in different ways are opportunities to demonstrate, iterate and celebrate new street ideas.



On Slow Streets, communities have already begun to initiate their own joyful uses of these newfound public spaces, from street-corner concerts to elaborate art installations. As the program has matured, groups like Kid Safe SF, Slow Sanchez and the Parks Alliance have begun to gather leaders from each Slow Street to share best practices and continue to foster community stewardship of these spaces. The SFMTA has been supportive of these “Slow Streets mayors,” as they fulfill the need for a Neighborhood Steward Group, which is required for any Slow Street that is seeking to become permanent. The SFMTA should also develop a preapproved toolkit of Shared Space and Slow Street components that would allow neighborhoods to implement their own ideas for more dynamic uses of streets and parking spaces. Those components might include parklet modules, Slow Streets barricades and street mural kits. Standard elements should have opportunities for creativity and customization by artists, designers and the local community. See Recommendation 4 for a toolkit example.

As the city incorporates permanent changes into the network, it should seek opportunities to include joyful and playful design that welcomes everyone while teaching them how to use these new spaces better.

San Francisco’s standard improvements should have intuitive and inclusive design cues, be culturally appropriate and focus on language accessibility. This sign for Oakland’s Slow Streets includes images of young Black girls holding hands and a person riding a scraper bike — culturally competent cues that represent the joyful diversity of the city’s residents.

Photo courtesy City of Oakland



Barcelona, Spain, uses optical illusions of levitating bars painted on the sidewalk to slow traffic at crosswalks. This playful approach helps shift norms in a way that feels less punitive and more joyful.

Photo © Ajuntament de Barcelona



### STRATEGY 3:

## Develop equitable and sustainable funding sources.

In San Francisco today, sidewalks are often poorly maintained and undersized, and bike lanes are frequently potholed, unswept and discontinuous. This is especially true in communities of color and less affluent neighborhoods. To achieve higher-quality improvements, and make them sustainable over time, the city needs to examine the fiscal barriers and establish funding sources for the long term, ensuring that underserved neighborhoods have equitable access to both the funding and the benefits.

### Recommendation 11: Dedicate funding for higher-quality streets.

*Who's responsible: Mayor's Office*

Achieving this new vision of streets as a valuable public asset means increasing funding to pay for higher-quality improvements and maintenance. The city could consider something like Washington, D.C.'s recently ended Unified Fund<sup>13</sup>, which was financed through parking taxes and Special Purpose Revenue (revenue from rights-of-way use paid by utilities, public space rentals, parking meters and bus shelter advertising). Revenue was reinvested back into transportation programs instead of the General Fund, which allowed for more flexibility with project funding and incentivized innovation to save money. In the future, San Francisco could go so far as to set aside a portion of funding for participatory budgeting, in which local communities vote on which street improvements to fund and implement in their neighborhoods.

<sup>13</sup> Klein, G., & Vega-Barachowitz, D. (2015). *Start-Up City: Inspiring Private and Public Entrepreneurship, Getting Projects Done, and Having Fun* (Illustrated ed.). Island Press.

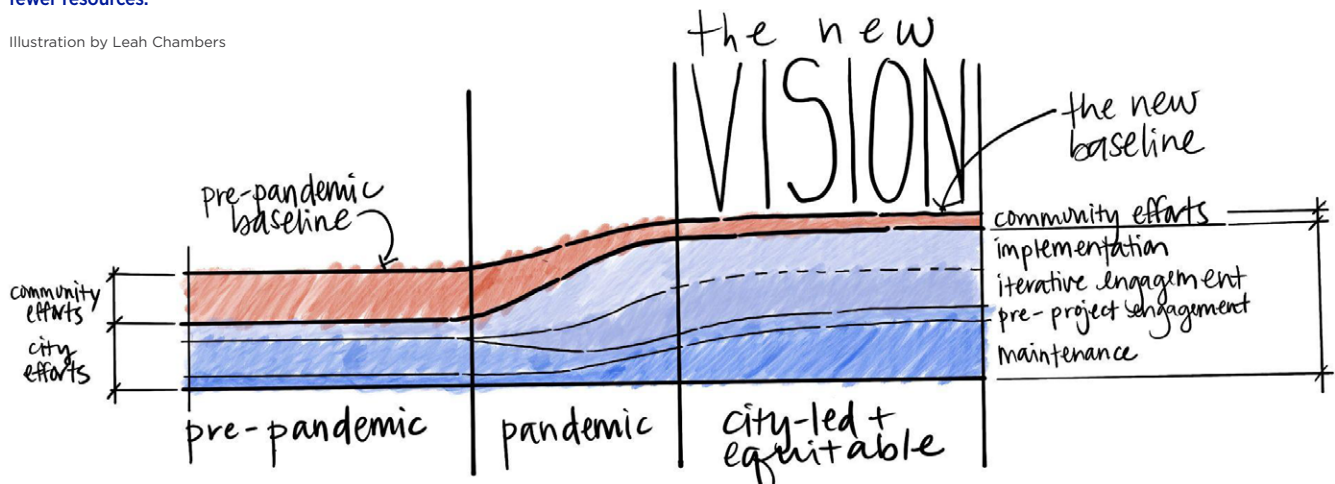
**Recommendation 12:**  
**Continue to disperse funding through community-based organizations in the short term.**

*Who's responsible: Mayor's Office*

Within the current framework, many community-based organizations across San Francisco provide their own funding for materials, installation and ongoing maintenance of street and open-space improvements. While this can lead to exceptional and exciting investments, this approach creates a barrier for many communities that do not have well-funded community-based organizations and contributes to an inequitable distribution of the benefits communities get from programs like Slow Streets and Shared Spaces. In this period of transition, the city should disperse near-term dedicated funding through local agencies such as community business organizations, BIDs, merchants' associations and "friends of" organizations. This funding would ensure that all neighborhoods can supplement street and open-space improvements and activate their streets or sidewalks to support recreation or economic activities. Over time, the city should examine the budget allocation and explore ways for shifting funding — or obtaining new funding — for streets as a critical public asset.

The important role of community organizations and advocates is to continually push for cities to improve their operations and offerings. In periods of transition, they can provide valuable and necessary services, filling gaps in city services. However, the ultimate goal is for the city to improve and maintain streets and open spaces in new and better ways, which would allow community-based organizations to move on to advocate for the next vision. In the long run, a strategy that relies heavily on community organizations for improved streetscapes contributes to inequity for neighborhoods whose community organizations receive fewer resources.

Illustration by Leah Chambers



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### **Recommendation 13:** **Address liability to allow innovation.**

*Who's responsible: Mayor's Office*

Public agencies are liable for physical damage to private property that is caused by a public improvement. This means that a public agency can be held liable even if the public improvement was properly designed, constructed and maintained. The city also bears risk for personal injury liability in certain circumstances, in addition to other liabilities such as compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. As a result, agencies are hesitant to take on nonstandard improvements that may cause unknown risk.

Because it is more cumbersome for the city to take on the liability of nonstandard street designs, private groups like neighborhood associations or the Parks Alliance often carry insurance policies on such spaces and projects. This is yet one more cost burden that makes it difficult for lower-income communities to benefit from streetscape improvements.

Instead of relying on other entities to bear the cost of streetscape improvements, the city should explore funding and liability mechanisms to enable innovation. For liability issues, the city could explore creating an Innovation Insurance program, which would assemble a pool of money that the city can use to protect against lawsuits when innovating. The Unified Fund, described in Recommendation 10, could provide funding for this type of insurance. As a shorter-term measure, the city could use Innovation Insurance or a Unified Fund to pay the Parks Alliance or other neighborhood organizations to hold the insurance.

### **Recommendation 14:** **Reinstate Sunday parking meters.**

*Who's responsible: SFMTA*

As SPUR has addressed in previous reports<sup>14</sup>, parking meter revenue can be an incentive to keep metered parking, and therefore it can work against efforts to create Shared Spaces. But requiring people to pay for meters can also incentivize them to use alternative modes of transportation that take less toll on the environment. Further, since parking represents the privatization of public space, it should be priced accordingly, with some fee levied at all times. Funding from reinstating meter payments on Sundays could go toward streetscape enhancements, transit subsidies for riders and measures that would support vulnerable businesses on these corridors, such as permit subsidies, grant funding for Shared Spaces and DPW maintenance of noncommercial Shared Spaces.

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14 Laura Tam, "Critical Cooling," *The Urbanist*, SPUR, May 1, 2009, <https://www.spur.org/publications/article/2009-05-01/critical-cooling/option-27>



## Revenue From Parking Versus People

SPUR estimates that the amount of parking meter revenue generated by one parking space on Valencia Street is approximately \$32.23 per day, or \$11,195 per year.<sup>15</sup>

If San Francisco were to implement Sunday parking meters, that same parking space could generate \$13,115 per year.

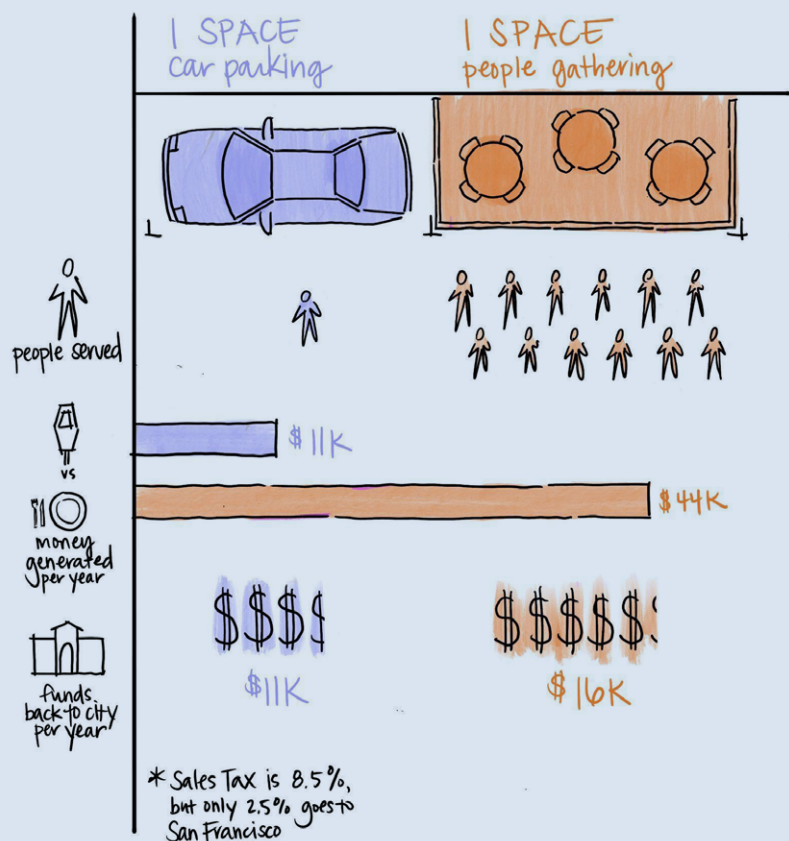
Compare this with the amount of sales tax that could be generated by using that same space as a restaurant parklet — an estimated \$44,060 per year,<sup>16</sup> or nearly four times the amount of revenue.

The political challenge is that parking meter revenue goes directly to the SFMTA to fund transit, whereas sales tax revenue goes to different places. Of the 8.5% sales tax that is charged, 2.5% goes to San Francisco’s General Fund, and the other 6% goes to the state’s General Fund.

However, if San Francisco were to recapture only its own portion of the sales tax revenue and redirect it to the SFMTA, this one parklet still would bring in more money than a parking meter — about \$12,960 per year, plus the associated benefits to commercial corridors (the creation of jobs and increased vibrancy on the street).

What’s more, a study by the San Francisco Office of the Controller<sup>17</sup> estimated that before the pandemic, businesses that installed a parklet saw a nearly 20% increase in sales revenue. If this trend held, then our example parking space could generate \$15,550 per year in dedicated revenue to the City of San Francisco — a nearly 40% increase in revenue over today’s parking meter.

Illustration by Leah Chambers



15 SFMTA, “SFpark Pilot Project Evaluation: The SFMTA’s Evaluation of the Benefits of the SFpark Pilot Project,” June 2014.

16 The following assumptions informed the calculation: three four-top tables, operating for 12 hours a day, 360 days a year at 60% occupancy, with a typical meal lasting 1.5 hours and a typical cost per meal of \$25 (based on \$15 main entree price cited in *Fodor’s San Francisco with the Best of Napa and Sonoma*, 2019).

17 City and County of San Francisco, Office of the Controller and Office of Economic Analysis, *Shared Spaces Program: Economic Impact Report*, May 24, 2021.

**STRATEGY 4:**

## Streamline the process to the fullest extent possible.

One of the positive things we heard from our outreach was that during the pandemic, the city defaulted to “yes” wherever possible in an effort to support business and neighborhood activity. The city should formalize this shift in governance from “permit and enforce” to “support and collaborate.”

**Recommendation 15:****Ensure the permit for Shared Spaces remains simple and predictable.**

*Who’s responsible: Mayor’s Office*

The recent passage of the Shared Spaces legislation is a step in the right direction to consolidate permits for street and sidewalk activations. The permit application continues to be simple and straightforward, but it requires the applicant to provide drawings, accept liability and wait for approval before proceeding with construction, which could result in an overly lengthy process. Also, current pandemic permits are only valid through the end of 2021, which may not be long enough to justify what could be a relatively large investment.

To further simplify the process, the city could provide templates with standard parklet designs that business owners can use and tailor without having to hire an engineer or designer, as was done for Oakland’s Flex Streets program.<sup>18</sup>

The city should continue to provide a preliminary notice to proceed within three business days of an application’s submission (as it has done during the pandemic), with collaborative troubleshooting and compliance assessment along the way (i.e., “You can go buy the materials while we finish processing your permit”). Finally, each permit should be valid for at least one year from the date of issue.

### Striking a (Re)Balance Between Implementing Permits and Appealing Them

For many of the city’s outdoor activity permits, it has generally been easier for one individual to appeal a permit than it has been for the business to get the permit in the first place. For example, to get a Tables and Chairs permit for outdoor dining before the pandemic, a business owner had to submit an application that included a measured site plan, and a public notice was posted for 10 days, during which time anyone could file an objection. If there were objections, a public hearing would be scheduled, and a decision would be made at the discretion of the DPW director. The DPW advised applicants that the process would take anywhere from two to six months, depending on site conditions, appeals and other considerations.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> For more about Oakland’s program, see <https://www.oaklandca.gov/resources/business-use-of-streets-and-sidewalks-initiative>

<sup>19</sup> San Francisco Public Works, “Café Tables and Chairs,” <https://www.sfpublishworks.org/services/permits/cafe-tables-and-chairs>

The pandemic's Shared Spaces program removed the opportunity to appeal permits in order to streamline the process and create more certainty for business owners. Moving forward, this rebalancing of effort should continue, making it easier for a business to get a permit and more difficult for an individual to appeal one.

### **Recommendation 16: Establish a Shared Spaces storefront.**

*Who's responsible: Mayor's Office*

During our interviews and workshops, people who'd had direct communication with a city staff member told us that they found the permitting process for Shared Spaces more efficient and positive. But organized business groups and associations reported that individual business owners found the permitting process prohibitively challenging and confusing. These owners relied heavily on the business organizations to help them get permits.

In order to expand the program, the Mayor's Office should establish a community-facing storefront where applicants can receive assistance with applications, questions and troubleshooting. The city should also proactively promote the program along commercial corridors where there is no organized business group or association or where such organizations exist but are under-resourced.

### **Recommendation 17: Lower the barriers for communities to activate their streets.**

*Who's responsible: SFMTA*

SPUR's outreach unearthed many stories from event organizers about how difficult and lengthy the process is to obtain permits even for simple events like block parties, much less larger events like annual parades and festivals. This process relies on incredible amounts of time and effort for both volunteers and city staff.

When permitting becomes an onerous part of the process, precious volunteer time is spent navigating bureaucracy rather than benefiting the community. To make room for lively, fun and diverse cultural events, San Francisco needs to make it much easier to get a permit. The SFMTA should create a tiered system for the types of activities that can occur in the public right-of-way. Permits for smaller events (such as single-day block closures for barbecues, picnics, food trucks and block parties) should be easy to obtain, with a simple application, a simple set of rules and no need for discretionary city approval. Permits for more complex events with multiblock closures, amplified music and/or temporary structures should be simplified and standardized as much as possible. The SFMTA should also offer an option for standing permits with simple renewals that can cover annual events like Japantown's Cherry Blossom Festival and Mission Street's Dia de los Muertos Parade.

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**Recommendation 18:**  
**Staff up for permanent programs.**

*Who's responsible: Mayor's Office, SFMTA, DPW, Department of Parks and Recreation*

Thanks to the efforts of courageous leaders, tireless staff and enthusiastic communities, many pandemic-related streetscape changes are already moving toward permanency. While these efforts should be commended, they were a nimble response to an emergency, and staff were pulled from other projects to work on these pandemic response programs.

As these programs become permanent, they will need dedicated staff to continue managing and operating them. Specifically, SPUR recommends building out SFMTA's Livable Streets team and the interagency team that was responsible for the Shared Spaces program. With these dedicated positions, programs could be formalized in staff workplans and program requirements (instead of being ad hoc), and the SFMTA and the Mayor's Office could continue the level of communication, iteration and improvement that was a hallmark of these programs during the pandemic.



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# Conclusion

As San Francisco moves through the pandemic and beyond, it must keep moving toward a bigger, bolder vision for its streets. Existing changes have already begun to hint at what's possible.

The first and most important action is to continue to build on what's been started. The city must now focus on making these programs work by removing bureaucratic barriers, identifying funding sources — especially for lower-income communities — and enhancing the prototyping and feedback loop.

Recreation, community, commerce and nature can all come together in city streets through an expanded set of Shared Spaces and part-time and full-time street closures. Neighborhoods can bring their streets alive with block parties, arts and events. Parks can have linear parks within them, offering long routes for bikes, and be truly car-free spaces for nature and recreation. And, critically, San Francisco can use its streets to make much more of its transportation sustainable, which will help reduce the threat of another global-scale crisis, the warming climate.

Streets bind the city together. They shape not only how people move through the city, but how they experience it as well. A once-in-a-century pandemic revealed a new way to look at city streets, and the lessons learned offer a glimpse of how we might experience and enjoy them well into the next century.







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