

Extending the Pop-Up Plaza Beyond COVID-19

Purpose: To provide recommendations on the potential extension of pop-up plazas in Vancouver beyond COVID-19.

Background: There has been plenty of research linking the construction of community spaces with improved sense of connection to community, mental health, community vibrancy and engagement.^{1,2,3,4} Urban community spaces such as street plazas can help support nearby businesses, decrease rates of crime and increase social capital which can improve health.^{5,6,7,8,9}

Current Status: The city of Vancouver has done plenty of work to support urban community spaces, including committing to the Healthy City Strategy, supporting mural construction and converting laneways into public space.¹⁰ One intervention is the pop-up plaza initiative, which has been created in order to provide safe ways for people to enjoy their neighbourhood and feel connected to their community during COVID-19.¹¹ There are currently 22 pop-up plazas located downtown and in residential neighbourhoods.¹² These plazas are intended to be temporary, and to serve only as part of the relief efforts for COVID-19.¹¹ The city is taking feedback regarding the plazas and has stated its intention to consider it in the decision-making regarding the possible continuation of pop-up plazas beyond COVID-19.¹¹

Options: The first option is to continue as originally planned and remove the pop-up plazas once they are no longer deemed necessary to counter the effects of COVID-19. Pros include that this would require no further action and would allow funds to be allocated elsewhere. Cons include that all pop-up plazas would be removed, to the detriment of community engagement. The second option is to remove plazas that have not received positive community feedback, and to only maintain the pop-up plazas that have garnered a large amount of public support. Pros would include that action is tailored to demand. Cons would include that only neighbourhoods with pre-existing high levels of community engagement would be able to keep their pop-up plaza, while neighbourhoods with low community engagement (and where plazas are perhaps most needed) would lose this resource. The third option is to transition all current “temporary” pop-up plazas into permanent fixtures, regardless of whether or not the city receives large amounts of positive feedback regarding each plaza. Pros include that all neighbourhoods continue to benefit from this initiative, while cons include that more funding than originally intended is required and may be put into areas where perceived demand is low.

Key Considerations: There may be a perception that pop-up plazas are not the most economical use of funds, and that relief efforts for COVID-19 could be put into more urgent areas. However, the funds required to maintain a plaza are likely relatively low for the improvements in mental health and community connection they provide. Plazas can also benefit nearby local business by increasing foot traffic and engagement, so the maintenance of pop-up plazas may be more cost beneficial than originally anticipated.

Recommendations: Pop-up plazas should be kept beyond COVID-19 and transitioned from temporary to permanent fixtures, even if they do not receive overwhelming positive feedback.

Appendix

Intended Audience:

This briefing note is intended to be directed toward Vancouver City Councillors, as these are the people who are responsible for city infrastructure initiatives including the construction of community spaces. The policy briefing may be most successfully received by city councillors Adriane Carr and Sarah Kirby-Young whose work foci include the construction of urban community spaces, however this document could prove useful to any Vancouver City Councillor who may be required to discuss the city initiative, and so is written with all ten of them in mind.

References:

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