



INFORMATION ITEM MEMORANDUM

To: Mayor and Members of Council

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Date: March 7, 2024

Subject: Information Item: Boulder Social Streets (formerly Downtown Streets as Public Space)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this information item is to summarize the history and analysis to date of Boulder Social Streets (BSS, formerly known as Downtown Streets as Public Space), as well as planned work for 2024.

The City of Boulder implemented temporary vehicular closures on a two-block portion of West Pearl Street during the COVID-19 pandemic to increase outdoor dining, provide safer spaces for community to gather, and to support businesses during a challenging time. In Fall 2022, the pandemic-related street closures for vehicles ended.

The city received significant feedback as it moved to re-open the impacted part of West Pearl to vehicles. City Council logged several hundred emails from community members who wanted to

see the roadway remain closed to vehicles permanently. An alternative perspective came from many business owners on West Pearl who said vehicle access was essential to their long-term viability, and community members who preferred or needed parking close to the businesses they wanted to frequent. There was also input related to the challenges a permanent street closure would pose for deliveries and emergency response.

Due to the significant community interest, City Council requested in spring/summer 2023 that staff develop recommendations for ways to activate downtown streets for increased public use and, in general, research how public streets in Boulder might function more as public spaces.

Staff presented the proposed BSS project to council in March 2023, based on public life analysis, urban design, transportation and community feedback analysis. The recommended pilot included multiple ways to reimagine streets: a pop-up series on 13th Street, two parklets downtown and a kit of parts with street furniture to help with placemaking. Council directed staff to prioritize the pop-up series on 13th Street between Arapahoe Avenue and Canyon Boulevard for a summer pilot. The pop-up series included eight event-based closures to facilitate more community connections and test programs to influence future street design. A key element of the pilot was to gather research regarding community behavior and interest in activating public streets, as well as to understand best practices from national experts regarding such spaces.

Following a Request for Proposals and two submittals, the City of Boulder contracted Downtown Boulder Partnership (DBP) to plan, advertise, and conduct the event series between June and September 2023. As part of the pilot, staff and a consultant team analyzed the event series from public life, urban design, transportation and community feedback perspectives.

This Information Packet provides some details about that effort. A more in-depth discussion, including a consultant presentation, is scheduled during the study session on April 25, 2024. At that session, staff will also outline their plans to leverage \$150,000, allocated as part of the 2024 approved budget, to further the creation of a program that supports community in reimagining public streets citywide.

BACKGROUND

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, west Pearl Street was closed to vehicular traffic from 9th to 11th streets, and 10th Street was closed from Pearl Street to Morrison Alley to respond to, and recover from, the effects of the pandemic. These blocks of the west Pearl Street area were temporarily closed to vehicles and activated as space for outdoor dining, gathering, programming and activation. After the pandemic-related temporary vehicular closure in September 2022, the city heard significant community interest for more pedestrianized spaces in the downtown area, as well as some concerns, mostly from adjacent businesses, about the West Pearl location.

City Council asked staff at its Sept. 15, 2022, meeting to create recommendations for increased public space in spring/summer 2023. Members asked staff to build on existing feedback and collect additional input to ensure that more people had the opportunity to share their perspective on downtown streets as public space. City Council requested that staff bring the recommendations forward in March 2023 so that timely implementation could occur before and during the warm weather months in Boulder.

Staff updated City Council on the BSS project at its March 23, 2023, meeting. The update focused on consultant recommendations for public space in the downtown area. Council agreed to move forward with one of staff’s proposals to test an event series on 13th Street in summer 2023. Council members emphasized the need to consider implementation logistics and funding. They also requested staff to continue gathering community feedback through the process.

ANALYSIS

Urban design consultant, Gehl, created an action plan for Boulder Social Streets in 2023 with the following objectives in mind:

1. Facilitate more community connections with joyful experiences
2. Expand downtown beyond the Pearl Street Mall
3. Better connect the pedestrian and bike network
4. Support Boulder businesses
5. Test programs to influence future street design
6. Inform ongoing and future city initiatives and projects downtown

City staff worked alongside consultants Gehl, Leadline (community engagement), and Fox Tuttle (engineering) to develop a well-rounded analysis of work conducted in 2023. Downtown Boulder Partnership (DBP) was chosen to implement the pop-up activities, which were scaled and timed to acknowledge the very limited lead planning time. (Usually similar-type events are planned a year in advance.)

Public Life Study and Spatial Analysis

Gehl used on-site observation tools and site visits to study the conditions on 13th Street. They observed both non-event and event days to determine and compare how many people moved through the area, what activities and behaviors they participated in, and their perceived demographics. In addition, Gehl assessed the existing qualitative attributes of 13th Street to identify opportunities for long-term improvements that enable public gathering spaces.

Key observations and insights from this analysis include:

- BSS created a “new pull” to downtown – making it a place that felt more neighborly than touristy.
- Event-goers felt both welcomed and included, especially for women and children.
- People felt safe, but there is room for improvement.
- Stakeholders hope a Boulder Social Streets type of program can better empower the public to lead street transformations.

Community Outreach and Engagement

Based on City Council direction in March 2023, staff emphasized community engagement as a core tenant of the BSS project to continue learning about community preferences and reach those whose voices have not been heard.

For engagement, the city and consultant team conducted eight mixed-methodology engagement tactics to learn from the community in summer 2024:

- Gehl’s public life app
- Chalkboard activities
- Poker Chip activities
- Photo board sticker voting
- Online questionnaire
- Facilitated interviews
- Experiments in Public Art
- Experiential evaluation group

The approach to each engagement tactic led by Leadline and their associated findings include:

- Most event attendees reside in Boulder. Of Boulder attendees, 44% drove their personal vehicle to the event, while 26% walked and 22% biked. This represents the most diversity in travel mode by residency.
- 44% of engagement respondents said that the type of event is the top reason they chose to attend the event, whereas the food, music, and location were not as important.
- No matter where the engagement respondent lived, the majority of respondents preferred street transformation in the form of “Pavement to Plaza”.
- There were far fewer online questionnaire respondents as compared to a similar questionnaire offered in early 2023. The questionnaire was offered all summer after each event and received 84 responses. Of the respondents:
 - 56% reside in Boulder; 40%+ earn more than \$100k per year; and 74% are White
 - A strong majority of respondents agree that events like these make Boulder public spaces feel welcoming and that spaces like this make them feel more connected to the Boulder community.
 - 45% of respondents visited downtown exclusively for the event and to not visit other downtown businesses. However, 26% of attendees already visited downtown shops/dining when they decided to attend the event.
- Boulder staff managed an experiential evaluation group with ten active members from diverse backgrounds. The group filled out an online form with feedback after each pop-up. There were two consultations to gather feedback on a potential future program. Main messages from this group include:
 - Activations need to be a community-driven for success.
 - The city should act as a facilitator and not as an event planner.
 - “Boulder is open space rich and community gathering space poor” – our community longs for more public spaces for social connection.
 - We should expand the opportunities for street activation beyond West Pearl and 13th Street downtown.
- Boulder staff worked with artist Edica Pacha to conduct an Experiment in Public Art funded through the Office of Arts and Culture. Pacha co-created with community a 20x20-foot temporary street mural on 13th Street during Community Art Day and the [placeholder] festival in October 2023. The mural was a mechanism to use the street in sharing back the community’s hopes and dreams for the public realm. Main themes from the feedback Pacha collected through community conversations are:
 - Simplifying the permitting process for artists and other community members to use streets for non-vehicles purposes is highly desirable.
 - Concerns that the city designs public spaces for tourists rather than to meet the needs of people living here
 - Safety concerns related mostly to the unhoused population in the Civic Area

West Pearl Business Owner Engagement

When committing to a 2023 focus on 13th Street, City Council asked staff to re-engage with the business community on West Pearl to assess the possibility of more exploration of solutions involving this stretch of roadway. Staff offered nine listening sessions and mailed invitations to approximately 300 businesses and property owners. The listening sessions had low attendance. Of the participants, the key takeaways include:

- Property and business owners reported minimal to no direct benefit from previous events and street closures on West Pearl.
- Temporary closures or events will not make up for the loss of revenue from a reduced workforce downtown.
- Participants are open to discussing future events or temporary activations, if the focus is on celebrating West Pearl’s unique and “special vibes,” rather than organizing events for the sake of activation. They requested that organizers actively seek their input on event layout and other details related to a street closure that could affect their businesses, before planning any activities or closures.

Transportation Analysis

The transportation analysis conducted in early 2023 demonstrated that traffic impacts to a closure on 13th Street would be unlikely. Existing street closures on 13th Street for Wednesday and Saturday Farmer’s Markets supported the study’s conclusion.

A traffic operations and multimodal analysis was conducted based on before- and during-event conditions at 13th Street and the surrounding intersections. The analysis supported that the intersections’ (Broadway & Canyon Boulevard; Broadway & Arapahoe Avenue; and Canyon Boulevard & 13th Street) level of service did not change based on 13th Street closures. Similarly, weekday versus weekend conditions had no impact on intersection levels of service.

The analysis concluded that 13th Street, between Arapahoe Avenue and Canyon Boulevard, could be closed to motor vehicle traffic completely or on weekends with few transportation-related technical challenges.

NEXT STEPS

As mentioned previously, staff will present more complete information about the 2023 efforts and consultant recommendations at a study session on April 25, 2024.

Unless otherwise directed by council, staff will continue its efforts to develop a distinct and ongoing Boulder Social Streets program in 2024. While details are still being developed, staff anticipates the limited funding will support:

1. The identification of streets citywide that might be appropriate for re-purposing, either temporarily or permanently, in parts of town other than downtown, where gathering options are more limited and where new uses might support equity goals; and
2. Engagement with residents and groups who might be interested in activating these streets to identify ways the city could reduce barriers to support community-led uses; and
3. Development of program characteristics and requirements to support future creation of a viable program, if council so desires, similar to the city’s Outdoor Dining Program