

CITY OF LOS ANGELES
INTER-DEPARTMENTAL CORRESPONDENCE

Date: May 10, 2022

To: Honorable City Council
c/o City Clerk, Room 395, City Hall
Attention: Honorable Mike Bonin, Chair, Transportation Committee

From: Seleta J. Reynolds, General Manager 
Department of Transportation

Subject: **FEASIBILITY STUDY TO IMPLEMENT CAR FREE STREETS IN DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES**

SUMMARY

As directed by the Los Angeles City Council (Council) on October 6, 2021, this report outlines considerations for a feasibility study in order to close Grand Avenue between 1st and 2nd Street, Broadway between 3rd and 4th Street, and Traction Avenue between 3rd Street and Hewitt Street to car traffic (CF 21-1131).

RECOMMENDATION

That the City Council DIRECT LADOT to initiate a feasibility study of street closure pilot demonstrations in Downtown Los Angeles, assess resources needed to implement the series of pilots, and conduct an evaluation study on initial findings, stakeholder feedback, and potential for permanent treatments.

BACKGROUND

In November, 2021, Council directed LADOT to report on the resources needed to conduct a feasibility study, in coordination with community stakeholders, of closing Grand Avenue between 1st and 2nd Street, Broadway between 3rd and 4th Street, and Traction Avenue between 3rd Street and Hewitt Street to car traffic, limiting the streets to transit vehicles and people walking and bicycling. The motion further instructs LADOT to explore a phased approach to implementation.

DISCUSSION

Opening streets to people supports community vibrancy, economic growth, street safety, public health, and air quality. Many cities have improved livability in their communities by limiting vehicular access to certain segments of a roadway. These activations vary in geographic scale, duration, material, capital investment, and purpose.

Project Examples in Other Cities

LADOT compiled relevant car-free project examples to inform a future feasibility study and activation in Los Angeles. Transformational examples include:

- Seoul, South Korea: Physically removing roadways to restore natural features such as the Cheonggyecheon River

- Barcelona, Spain: Implementing strict traffic management measures and converting street space into space for people in dense neighborhoods using a “Superblocks” concept
- San Francisco, CA: Limiting private vehicle traffic entry and use of streets such as “Better Market Street”
- Santa Monica, CA: Closing streets to all vehicle traffic in commercial districts along the 3rd street promenade

Recent local examples that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic to transform portions of roadway networks and parking into expanded public spaces that support local businesses, reduce overcrowding, and provide increased public space include:

- Burbank, CA: The City of Burbank closed off a part of San Fernando Road, one of its busiest downtown streets, to vehicle traffic to provide more space for outdoor dining and more space for social distancing.
- Culver City, CA: The City of Culver City initiated a month-long demonstration project along several blocks in its downtown to expand pedestrian space, limit private vehicle access, and provide dedicated bus lanes as part of its long-term MOVE Culver City initiative.
- Glendale, CA: The City of Glendale redesigned two blocks of Artsakh Avenue from a two-way into a one-way street and used the reclaimed space to extend sidewalks and pedestrian plazas, and provide space for outdoor seating, landscaping, and art displays.
- Glendora, CA: The City of Glendora closed Meda Avenue to vehicular traffic to expand outdoor seating and public gathering space.
- Santa Barbara, CA: The City of Santa Barbara redesigned State Street Promenade into a 10-block pedestrian walkway in the heart of the entertainment and retail district.
- Santa Monica, CA: The City of Santa Monica launched Main St Al Fresco that redesigned the street to transform a former center turn lane and on street parking into space for outdoor dining and people.
- Whittier, CA: The City of Whittier transformed the Greenleaf Promenade into a two block long temporary pedestrian-only corridor that offers outdoor dining, leisure, and shopping.
- Ventura, CA: The City of Ventura initiated Main Street Moves, which transformed five blocks of Main Street into a pedestrian-friendly area open to pedestrians and bicyclists only.

City of Los Angeles People-Focused Programs

The City of Los Angeles has experience transforming car spaces into accessible and car-free open spaces including pedestrian plazas, places for play, and outdoor dining. A few of the City’s existing programs include:

People St

People St is an application-based program launched in 2014 that converts roadway spaces into pedestrian plazas where neighbors can gather, eat, or socialize. People St plazas prohibit all vehicle traffic, including buses, pending annual approval by LADOT and the local community sponsor. The program plaza guidelines were created through an interdepartmental feasibility analysis, a pilot demonstration project, and a robust evaluation comparing before and after conditions. Streamlining site feasibility, community outreach, plaza

materials, environmental clearance, and on-going maintenance creates a pathway to delivering a pedestrian plaza. In some cases, the City deploys People St elements to implement streetscape changes with interim materials such as on Broadway in Downtown Los Angeles where LADOT built planned sidewalk expansions, envisioned in the Broadway Streetscape Plan, with thermoplastic and potted planters to delineate expanded pedestrian space.

Play Streets

Play Streets is an application-based program that temporarily transforms a neighborhood street into a playground, typically for several hours over a weekend. Local organizations or individuals acting on behalf of their neighbors nominate a street for the activation, conduct outreach, and gather signatures to demonstrate community support. Subsequently, LADOT closes the street and sets the stage for play with a mobile “Box of Play” kit that contains barricades and free-form play equipment. The Play Street program prohibits access to all vehicles, including buses, during the activation. The program is focused on providing new recreational opportunities for youth in park-poor communities, suffering from low air quality. The activations are limited to residential streets, so only local and collector streets are eligible.

L.A. Al Fresco

The City launched L.A. Al Fresco in May 2020 as a way to supplement limited indoor dining and social distancing requirements related to COVID-19. The program converts private parking lots, sidewalks, and on-street parking to accommodate outdoor dining. Upon request, and where feasible and appropriate, LADOT will close one lane of travel to provide additional dining space to multiple businesses on a single block. Examples include 1st Street between Central Avenue and San Pedro Street in Little Tokyo, and Magnolia Boulevard between Lankershim Street and Vineland Avenue in North Hollywood. This single lane closure prohibits any vehicular traffic and remains in effect at all times.

Open Streets

During Open Streets events, streets are closed to vehicle traffic but remain open to people-powered transportation such as walking, bicycling, skating, and scooting. In Los Angeles, non-profit organizations such as CicLAvia typically host such events with support from public agencies. City resources manage changes to traffic patterns along open street routes with support from volunteers at intersections limited to a weekend day.

Zero Emissions Areas

The Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP) worked with City of Los Angeles staff for two years to develop a [Zero Emissions Area \(ZEA\) Plan](#). A ZEA is defined as a diverse set of mobility interventions that together create a space where there are fewer vehicles and all trips are zero-emission. Car free streets are a component of a ZEA and would advance goals identified in the Plan. A citywide evaluation by ITDP identified Downtown LA as a top area to prioritize for ZEA investments. Through the Climate Challenge, the Energy Foundation also funded an Equity Leader Task Force composed of 15 grassroots organizations that developed equity considerations and processes for implementing ZEAs. The vision for ZEAs in Los Angeles is to transform streets by making it easier for people using transit, driving clean cars, biking, scooting, or walking to get around. The ZEA will also create positive health benefits by decreasing air pollution and making streets safer for walking and rolling. A ZEA will be successful in Los Angeles by moving forward in collaboration with the community and addressing equity.

Feasibility Study

The City of Los Angeles programs and plans described above focus mainly on small-scale or temporary non-vehicular activities that have been deployed in different parts of the City. A larger, longer-term model in three distinct locations in Downtown Los Angeles requires an understanding of the full spectrum of possibilities

within existing programs or as a new program. A feasibility study would explore programmatic goals, site-specific considerations, and conduct an evaluation to assess outcomes.

A feasibility study will require input from several departments and should consider the following aspects:

- Environmental clearance
- Consistency with Mobility Plan and Mobility Plan Settlement Agreement
- Emergency access
- ADA access
- Drop off and loading zones
- Traffic circulation patterns and local access needs
- Urban greening opportunities
- Enforcement and security
- Transit service access
- Evaluation

LADOT requires consultant support to develop a feasibility study of implementing “car free zone” pilot activations to test a variety of implementation strategies over the course of a few days or longer that could include maintaining transit as part of the project design. The activations would incorporate a robust community outreach component, consistent with LADOT’s Community First Engagement model. The study will require a comprehensive evaluation including data collection before, during, and after the activation pilots to assess the outcomes of the pilots in relation to their goals. The assessment will include measuring walking and bicycling, transit use; conducting intercept surveys to understand user perception; and could include studying economic impacts and people’s mode of arrival. LADOT will also study vehicle volumes on the cross streets and parallel streets to better understand potential diversion and circulation impacts. LADOT will incorporate the evaluation findings and implementation recommendations into the feasibility study to inform any future permanent conditions.

A feasibility study of this scope and magnitude will cost approximately \$300,000 to \$500,000.

FISCAL IMPACT

No impact to the General Fund is anticipated unless the City Council allocates funds to advance the car-free feasibility study.

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