



Legislation Text

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City of Alexandria, Virginia

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MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** OCTOBER 5, 2021

**TO:** THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

**FROM:** MARK B. JINKS, CITY MANAGER /s/

**DOCKET TITLE:**

Introduction and First Reading. Consideration. Passage on First Reading of an Ordinance Approving and Authorizing the Closure of the 100 Block of King Street to Vehicular Traffic.

**ISSUE:** Consideration of closing the 100 block of King Street to vehicular traffic.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That the City Council:

1. Introduce and pass on first reading Tuesday, October 12, 2021, the ordinance (Attachment 2) approving and authorizing the closure of the 100 block of King Street to vehicular traffic; and
2. Schedule the ordinance for second reading, public hearing, and final passage on Saturday, October 16, 2021.

**BACKGROUND:** The section of the 100 block of King Street between Lee Street and Union Street is a two-way street heading east and west with parking on both sides of the block. The block is commercial with several restaurants and retail establishments. Before the pandemic, many restaurants participated in the City's outdoor dining program, which allowed restaurant seating on the sidewalk while maintaining a 5-foot wide accessible path for pedestrians. Approximately 25 parking spaces on this block are restricted to 2-hour, metered parking from Monday to Saturday from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m.

In 2015, the City completed the Lower King Street Multi-modal Feasibility Study, which included several design options for reconfiguring traffic, parking, and pedestrian space along the 100 block of King Street. Following that study, in 2019 the Council directed staff to develop a pilot program to test closing the 100 block of King Street to car traffic. In consultation with stakeholders, staff developed a hybrid concept to expand seating and programming along with one lane of traffic called King Street Place. Staff presented the pilot program to the Council on March 10, 2020, but with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent "stay at home" orders, the pilot was placed on hold.

As the City began the re-opening process, staff developed a Temporary Outdoor Business permit for restaurant, retail, and fitness businesses to use adjacent parking spaces for conducting business outdoors. Given the concentration of restaurants and pedestrians along the 100 block of King Street, as well as the desire to provide expansive space for pedestrians to safely maintain distance, staff worked with the businesses to modify the King Street Place concept and close the 100 block to all car traffic, which took effect on May 29, 2020. The temporary street closure was later approved by the Council and extended several times. The closure is currently approved through April 1, 2022.

**DISCUSSION:** The street closure and additional space for pedestrians have been well-received by the community. Over 2,700 responses were provided on a call for feedback about the temporary street closure (Attachment 3). Of resident respondents, 89% had a positive experience with the 100 block street closure, and 92% of residents responded that they wanted to see the closure continue into the future. Throughout the closure, 100 block businesses periodically expressed support for the closure. Most recently, at an August outreach meeting, a majority of businesses on the block noted their interest in permanent closure.

Given the support for this closure, staff has proposed permanently closing this block to vehicular traffic and investing in a more permanent design for the block. As part of this proposal, staff recommends maintaining the existing 22-foot Emergency Vehicle Easement down the center of the street for pedestrians only and adding 5-foot wide pedestrian paths along both sidewalks between the buildings and the curb, similar to what was provided through the King Street Outdoor Dining program (see draft conceptual plan in Attachment 4). The remaining area on the sidewalk and in the parking lane would be available to businesses through a permitting process. If approved, staff will use allocated American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding for short-term improvements for this block, such as new barricades, street furniture, and signage. A more permanent design for the block would be considered through the Capital Improvement Program (CIP) budget.

Transportation impacts, including parking, traffic, and transit routes, have been considered as part of this closure. Because of the pandemic's significant impact on travel patterns, analyzing transportation trends is challenging, and predictions for future travel patterns are somewhat uncertain. The analysis provided below summarizes available data, and more details are provided in Attachment 5.

- **Traffic:** Travel data in the King Street area from StreetLight Data, Inc. suggest that traffic volumes in July 2021 remain below 2019 levels. T&ES staff plans to conduct detailed traffic counts for trucks and heavy vehicles on Duke Street and other adjacent streets to address truck traffic this fall, with completion anticipated in Spring 2022.
- **Parking:** After a significant decline in both on and off-street parking activity during the height of the pandemic, parking appears to be returning to pre-pandemic levels. Closure of this block eliminated 25 metered parking spaces, but the data suggest parking demand is adjusting to the loss of these spaces and finding a new equilibrium at a similar level as before the pandemic. While daily nearby garage parking has increased over the months, activity from monthly parking clients remains well below normal, leaving many spaces available for use. There are several public parking options nearby that can accommodate the parking demand from losing these 25 spaces (3 garages within 1 block, 3 garages within 2 blocks, and 4 garages/lots within 3-5 blocks). In addition, staff will continue to explore other parking management strategies for the area, including an expansion of residential pay by phone boundaries, changes to pricing on-street and in City garages, and additional wayfinding and parking information.

- **Transit:** Before the pandemic, the only transit route operating on this block was the King Street Trolley. During the pandemic, Trolley service was suspended and resumed in July 2021, using existing bus stops at Market Square as the terminus for the route. If the 100 block is closed permanently, the Trolley will continue to terminate at Market Square. DASH and T&ES Staff evaluated alternative routes for the Trolley to provide closer access to the waterfront and decided against any broader re-design of the routing at this time. Staff will evaluate ridership and operations for the shortened route and any potential impact from broader changes with the new DASH bus network and free bus fares.

The Waterfront Commission reviewed this request at their meeting on September 21, 2021 and voted to support it with a strong recommendation to improve the condition of the block and ensure there are adequate safety barriers to protect pedestrians. The Traffic and Parking Board also reviewed the request at their meeting on September 27, 2021. The Board voted to recommend the Council approve this request. The Planning Commission reviewed the proposal for consistency with the Alexandria Master Plan as required by Section 9.06 of the City Charter. They voted to approve the request, finding it is consistent with the Master Plan and the goals of the Waterfront Plan, which call for increasing and improving pedestrian access and connections throughout the Waterfront. Staff also met with the Visit Alexandria Board of Governors on September 27, 2021 and the Chamber of Commerce on October 5, 2021. Letters of support are provided in Attachment 6.

The Unit Block of King is not proposed for closure at this time. TES has indicated that it needs more time to study the traffic and truck delivery prior to making a Unit Block closure recommendation. The study will occur this fall and winter with a recommendation to Council targeted for early spring.

**FISCAL IMPACT:** If the closure is approved, staff will use ARPA funding to implement short-term improvements within the next 3 to 9 months. In July 2021, the Council allocated \$100,000 from the first tranche of federal ARPA funding for specific improvements on the block. Funding was also allocated as foundational support for commercial business districts, so businesses on this block could use a portion of that funding to improve their outdoor space should the Old Town Business Association choose to apply for this funding. A plan for a permanent redesign of the block could be considered as a CIP project through the budget process. Funding for this project from the second tranche of ARPA funding may be requested during that process.

Since the closure eliminates 25 metered parking spaces, there is a slight reduction in meter revenue. In 2019, this block collected approximately \$105,000 in meter revenue, or \$4,200 per space. During the early months of the pandemic, meter revenue across the City was significantly reduced, with transactions dropping by 90% in April 2020. However, the loss of these spaces may not equate to the same loss of revenue since people will park in other meter locations and garages. In the summer of 2021, parking transactions and revenues are near to pre-pandemic levels, even with the repurposing of these spaces.

There is a positive revenue impact from additional meal taxes collected as this closure will allow restaurants to expand their seating outdoors. While exact estimates are difficult to project, input from the Feedback Form indicates a strong preference to dine outside. Providing more space for this will help restaurants maintain and possibly increase business.

As noted, businesses would be able to use the expanded public space for private use through a permitting process. This will be established through the parklet program considered in a separate ordinance. Fees for parklets will be set by Council resolution, and staff anticipates recommending a different fee structure for

businesses on this block given the prime location in Old Town and improved pedestrian area. The fees will compensate the City for the use of public space and support any additional operational impacts that may occur as a result of the street closure.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

Attachment 1: Ordinance Cover

Attachment 2: Ordinance

Attachment 3: Summary of Feedback Form

Attachment 4: Draft Concept Plan for Closed Block

Attachment 5: Transportation Analysis

Attachment 6: Letters of Support

Attachment 7: Presentation

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