



PROPOSED SIDEWALK CAFÉ CODE AMENDMENTS AND PROGRAM UPDATES

SIDEWALK CAFÉ PROGRAM

Sidewalk cafés are valuable assets to our streets, sidewalks, and plazas. Since we began managing the sidewalk café program in 2008, we have provided permits for outdoor seating to nearly 400 food service businesses in over 30 neighborhoods across the city.

PROPOSED CHANGES TO SIDEWALK CAFÉ CODE

The rules and regulations detailing how SDOT manages sidewalk cafés—Seattle Municipal Code Chapter 15.16 and the Sidewalk Café Director’s Rule—have not been substantially updated since 2011. Since then, SDOT staff and customers have identified barriers in the existing regulations that prevent businesses from taking full advantage of outdoor dining options. Under this legislative proposal, we will update the café rules and regulations to encourage additional program participation. The new standards expand café opportunities for businesses by right-sizing regulations and formalizing different design options, while also ensuring that we are meeting the mobility and access needs of our growing city.

Following are descriptions of the key changes to the Seattle Municipal Code and the SDOT Director’s Rule. The goals of these changes are: to be responsive to the concerns of the business community; to increase opportunities for businesses to expand their operations in the right of way; and to further the City’s commitment to creating vibrant social spaces.

Sidewalk Café Program Goals

- Increase the vibrancy of our streets, sidewalks, and public spaces
- Support economic development in business districts by expanding seating options for patrons
- Ensure safety and mobility of the traveling public

1. Allow Cafés in More Places

Remove setback from low-density residential zoning.

Currently, sidewalk cafés are not allowed within 50 feet of lots zoned for low-density residential uses (i.e., Residential Small Lot zones, Single Family zones, and Lowrise zones). By removing this restriction, we would be allowing businesses in these areas to apply for outdoor seating. We can use other mechanisms to mitigate anticipated impacts to residential areas, including collecting community feedback during the public comment period and adding permit conditions related to café operation, including restricting the hours of operation.

Cafés extending beyond the business frontage. SDOT will now consider applications for cafés and streateries that extend beyond the hosting business’ frontage when site conditions warrant additional public space activation.

2. Formalize Successful Pilot Programs for Design Alternatives and Siting Flexibility

Streateries. Similar to parklets, streateries are small spaces constructed in the curb space, typically where cars park or unload goods. Unlike parklets, streateries are operated by restaurants and are used for table service for patrons and function like a sidewalk café. Streateries—called “curb space cafés” in the proposal—will be required to remain open for public use when the hosting business is not in operation.



CONTACT

For questions and information, contact Ellie Smith (ellie.smith@seattle.gov or 206-684-9229) or visit our website www.seattle.gov/transportation/projects-and-programs/programs/public-space-management-programs/sidewalk-seating



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Fence-free sidewalk cafés. Since 2016, SDOT has offered a pilot fence-free sidewalk café permit option, which swaps fencing for pavement markers affixed to the sidewalk to delineate the café footprint. This type of design allows for a more open-air dining experience, connecting public space to the café area and reducing costs associated with fencing. We are formalizing this as a permanent option for food service businesses.

3. Fix Pedestrian Mobility Standards

Pedestrian straight path. The current requirement of a 3- to 4-foot-wide unobstructed, straight path along the entire block face (known as the 'pedestrian visual corridor') was intended to provide pedestrians a clear indication of the path of travel and minimize sharp turns. However, we have found this requirement to be overly restrictive for applicants and unnecessarily long for achieving intended mobility outcomes. The updated standard would instead require a 3-foot-wide 'pedestrian straight path' adjacent to and extending 25 feet on either end of the café, taking into account the immediate sidewalk context and maintaining the clear 'pedestrian straight path' adjacent to the café.

Pedestrian clear zone. Because Seattle is a rapidly growing city, we need to ensure that sidewalks can accommodate the activity associated with high pedestrian volumes, people waiting for transit, and freight and commercial loading uses. As such, the 'pedestrian clear zone' standard—the part of the sidewalk adjacent to cafés that is reserved for pedestrian travel—needs to be adjusted to fulfill the policy objectives established in the [Pedestrian Master Plan](#) and better meet the needs of our transportation network. Specifically, the minimum width of the 'pedestrian clear zone' will increase from 6 feet to 8 feet for new cafés located on Downtown Streets (as defined in [Streets Illustrated](#)) and from 5 feet to 6 feet for new cafés located on all other street types citywide. This will result in a pedestrian clear zone standard that reflects the relative demand for sidewalk space and aligns our standards with those used throughout cities similar to ours like San Francisco, Vancouver, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Austin.

WHAT BUSINESSES WILL BE IMPACTED?

These new standards will apply to all new café applications and existing café owners will not be directly impacted. However, when a business with a café permit changes ownership, the new owner will be required to apply for a either a permit transfer of the existing café or a new café permit (which would need to follow the new standards).

Businesses that secure permits for vending in the right-of-way from SDOT—such as sidewalk vending, plaza vending, curb space vending, and mobile food vending, and merchandise display—may also be impacted by the proposal at the point of application since the mobility standards mentioned above will be updated across the Seattle Municipal Code to create consistency.



Streatery in Capitol Hill



Fence-free café in San Francisco (Google 2018)

WHAT IS THE ANTICIPATED IMPACT?

Overall, these changes are expected to boost program participation by allowing for more flexibility in review, reducing location restrictions, and offering new opportunities for additional design alternatives (e.g., streateries, fence-free).

The wider pedestrian clear zone standard may result in narrower cafés than what is currently permitted, while the new pedestrian straight path standard may allow for wider cafés or cafés in places where they haven't been allowed in the past. These pedestrian mobility standards will also be updated for vending uses (including sidewalk vending, plaza vending, curb space vending, and merchandise display) and communication cabinets in the right of way to create consistency throughout the Seattle Municipal Code.

With this proposal, we recognize that many businesses have unique sidewalk conditions next to their business that may limit cafés. Now, we may allow modifications to pedestrian clear zone widths and other standards in [Streets Illustrated](#) through the [Deviation Request Process](#) upon determining that adequate space is provided for pedestrian passage, traffic management, and any other public-use purpose. This allows our permit review process to be more flexible and site-specific.