



City of Portland Design Commission

Briefing

SUMMARY MEMO

Date: March 15, 2023
To: Sarah Figliozzi & Nick Falbo, PBOT
From: Benjamin Nielsen, Design / Historic Review
(503) 865-6519, benjamin.nielsen@portlandoregon.gov
Re: Briefing on Healthy Business Permit & Public Street Plaza Programs
Summary of January 19, 2023, Design Commission briefing

Thank you for taking advantage of the opportunity to hold a preliminary briefing with the Design Commission regarding your development of standards and guidelines for the Healthy Business Permit program, Street Seats, and the Public Street Plaza program. I hope you find it informative and valuable as you continue with on these projects. Attached is a brief summary of the comments provided by the Design Commission at the January 19, 2023, briefing. This summary was generated from notes taken at the public meeting and a subsequent review of the public meeting recordings. To review those recordings, please visit: <https://efiles.portlandoregon.gov/Record/15796764/>.

These Design Commission comments are intended to guide you in further design exploration of your project. These comments may also inform City staff when giving guidance over the course of future related land use reviews, if any should be needed. It should be understood that these comments address the project as presented on January 19, 2023. As the project evolves, the comments, too, may evolve or may no longer be pertinent.

Preliminary briefings are not intended to substitute for other Code-required land use or legislative procedures.

Please continue to coordinate with Benjamin Nielsen, as necessary as you prepare your formal land use application and as you prepare your application.

Encl:
Summary Memo

Cc: Design Commission

This memo summarizes **Design Commission** comments provided on January 19, 2023.

Commissioners in attendance on January 19, 2023 include: Brian McCarter, Chandra Robinson, Julie Livingstone, Zari Santner

Commissioners all enjoy, appreciate, and use street seats and commend PBOT for taking on the process of standardizing the program and developing guidelines for their construction and maintenance.

In terms of issues that need to be addressed to make **street seats** even more successful:

- Commissioners noted that transparency is very important. Many current street seats are blocking views to the sidewalk and into businesses from the street and also blocking visibility of traffic at intersections.
- Trash can be a problem with street seats. Commissioners encouraged adding trash cans/compactors along the sidewalk.
- Commissioners noted that many of the existing street seats are essentially left empty and unused during the colder, rainier seasons, and that these don't serve the community or nearby businesses well during those periods of time. There either needs to be consideration as to how these will be used year-round, or else a simple platform with no vertical elements would be preferable for seasonal street seat use.
- One commissioner recommended that staff research structures that are placed in parking areas in European cities, noting that they are made "cheaply, pleasantly, and elaborately" and "are so far ahead in how they do it."

Commissioners similarly agree that the notion of **public street plazas** is wonderful.

- Commissioners wondered if PBOT was seeking partners in these plazas and encouraged that conversations be held with RACC and/or PCNA, and other similar institutions, to find where there could be areas within these public street plazas for temporary art. Adding art to the plazas could provide another attractor for people to use and visit the plazas.
- Related to this, commissioners found that paint on the street surface does not really do a lot for placemaking. One commissioner recommended that staff look at placing permanent installations on sidewalks and in curb lanes, leaving the travel lanes as spaces to be occupied on a more temporary basis. One commissioner noted that asphalt is a "rotten surface for a plaza."
- One commissioner recalled some "not entirely positive" experiences with some of the street plazas (specifically those closer to Old Town), noting that they sometimes encourage campers to come to those areas. He emphasized that it is important to get buy-in from all business owners on and near such plazas.
- One commissioner showed a photo scene of Steven's Street in Calgary, Alberta, noting that flexibility in use of street plaza areas could be beneficial. This example has a street that's closed between 6am and 6pm but which opens to cars for some on-street parking, emergency vehicle access, and maintenance at night. Another example cited is the 16th Street Mall in Denver, Colorado, in which one commissioner said that the Downtown Denver Partnership would place a set of stacking chairs out in the street during the morning, letting people arrange them how they like. Later in the day, the seats would be removed to allow different uses in the evening.
- One commissioner stressed the need to vegetate plazas with huge pots for plants and shade trees, noting that doing this would be both environmentally and aesthetically very good.

For both street seats and public street plazas:

- Commissioners agree that these spaces do not need to be expensive to create and maintain, but they need to look like they are being taken care of.
- Durability of materials used and a sense of permanence are also important considerations. Street seats and street plazas need more than plain plywood, which will weather quickly. Commissioners noted that durability is less important for seasonal installations that are removed and stored elsewhere during the rainy months. One commissioner said that “if they are seasonal, then the choice of materials should indicate that they are seasonal.”
- Commissioners pressed staff on the need to bring these types of interventions downtown with specific programming to help bring visitors to the area.

Files related to this Briefing can be found here:
<https://efiles.portlandoregon.gov/Record/15695071/>.

Please contact me with any questions.