

Downtown outdoor dining space could expand with 'parklets'

By Tobias Wall, Staff Writer

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Downtown Springfield's landscape could soon include expanded outdoor opportunities for restaurants and other businesses with the removal of parking spaces in favor of "parklets." An informational meeting conducted by city traffic engineer Lori Williams was held Monday evening at Maldaner's Restaurant, 222 S. Sixth St., to introduce the plan to business owners and downtown residents. Michael Higgins, owner and chef at Maldaner's, first approached the city with the idea of taking metered parking spaces away from the curb and creating a semi-enclosed, usable outdoor dining space a year ago after seeing them during a visit to his hometown of San Francisco.

"I was home visiting, and they just had these things in the street. And I thought, 'That's cool, we could do that (in Springfield),' " Higgins said. "Springfield has been looking for different ways to increase tourism and walkability, and these (parklets) fit into that." Higgins said ditching the parking spaces for the parklets would be good for business and would make the downtown landscape "a little more interesting."

Williams, aided by an artist's rendering, explained that the parklets would take up two parking spaces at their smallest, a length of 32 feet. They'd be built by extending a drainable floor outward from the sidewalk 8 feet. Railing at least 42 inches high would be required at both ends of the parklet as well as along the side facing the street. The floor would be built level with the sidewalk. Concrete parking ties would be placed six feet past each end of the space, making the parklet a total of 44 feet long. The parklets would be built in modules so that they could be removed and stored during the cooler months and allow city plows to work unhindered after snowstorms. Since they'd be built in modules, the parklets could take up more than two parking spaces if business owners wanted, Williams said.

Responding to some residents' concern, Williams said the parklets wouldn't be unsafe. Instead, she said, they would actually work to calm the usually speedy Sixth Street traffic. "When you have physical objects that are stationary, that are there all the time, they have a kind of tunneling affect," Williams said. "It will slow people down. Curb bump-outs are a great example, and we've done that along Adams Street." Williams said adding the parklets on wide city streets could help treat what she called Springfield's "speeding problem." "We have a problem where people want to get from one end of town to another in five minutes flat, and you just can't do it," she said.

Whoever has a parklet can decorate it however they want, she added, and the more prominent the parklets appear, the more drivers will slow down for them. Williams said after Monday's meeting that the next step for the city is to decide what to charge businesses to utilize the parking spaces in front of their buildings.

"We're trying to get our policies and procedures set. We're talking to our corporation counsel now to see what the fee structure is going to be," she said. Abbas Zolghadr, who owns Z Bistro right next door to Higgins at 220 S. Sixth St., said he wasn't currently interested in having a parklet in front of his restaurant, but said he's excited to see how it works for Higgins. "He's very excited about doing this, and as his neighbor, I do whatever it takes to support his ideas," Zolghadr said. "I think it's fantastic for the kind of service he provides for his customers. They'll all be excited to have the extended area for dining."

Meanwhile, Higgins' prototype is under construction, having already been designed by Coppertree Outdoor Lifestyles, a business specializing in outdoor space usage. He plans to have the parklet up and running sometime this summer for a trial period. If all goes well and the city gives the green light, Williams said residents should start seeing more parklets pop up downtown next spring.