

Livable Places Update

Emerging Trends in Community Planning and Design

January 2012

www.lgc.org

An Urban Redevelopment Idea for Today:

In the face of local agency economic crises and the dismantling of redevelopment agencies, one type of construction project is on the increase. It's an urban renewal strategy that holds the promise of fighting blight, adding green space, increasing property values, and strengthening a sense of community, all at very little expense to the city — *the parklet!*

In a very short period of time, parklets have become common enough to be defined in Wikipedia: "A parklet is a small urban park, often created by replacing several under-utilized parallel parking spots with a patio, planters, trees, benches, café tables with chairs, fountain(s), artwork, sculptures and/or bicycle parking." Parklets offer a new way for citizens, business-owners, and corporate interests to engage in the beautification of their communities.

The first parklet is said to have appeared in San Francisco in 2005, installed by staff of a local design studio. These creative activists fed a parking meter, unrolled grass sod on the asphalt, and placed a potted tree on top. Rather than prohibiting this unusual act of civil disobedience, innovative San Francisco planning staff made it legal.



A parklet on Columbus Avenue in San Francisco uses two parking spaces for cafe seating and plants.
Photo Courtesy of Matthew Roth

Temporary Sidewalk Extensions, or "Parklets," are now permitted as part of the City's Better Streets Policy that prioritizes the use of public space for pedestrians, bicycles, and public transit over automobiles. Repurposing on-street parking spots has allowed pedestrians more space to sit and enjoy outdoor space and bicyclists more parking. The Planning Department is responsible for issuing RFPs for permits, but the program's success relies on collaboration between the Mayor's Office, the Department of Public Works and the Metropolitan Transit Authority. The temporary nature of a parklet allows the City and County of San Francisco to rate whether the success of the space warrants a more long-term investment.

Permit holders are responsible for the design, construction, maintenance and programming of the parklet. They are required to sign a maintenance agreement and provide evidence of liability insurance. Though the permittee is often a business adjacent to a parklet, required signage reinforces that patrons do not have priority to occupy the space. Since temporary developments don't require traffic or environmental studies, the permitting process is simplified to "green light construction."

Within the past three years, San Francisco's streets have become more bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly with the addition of 22 of these inexpensive and easily-constructed public spaces sprinkled throughout the City. A recent request by the City for more parklet proposals elicited 31 new applications.

Last fall, Oakland developed their own program, issuing a set of guidelines and an RFP based on the San Francisco model. Anyone wanting to build a parklet is invited to apply for a permit. The City intends to permit eight parklets in a test pilot project. As long as all goes well with those projects, the expectation is that more permits will be issued.

Anyone hoping to hold a permit for a parklet in Oakland must carry appropriate insurance, agree to maintain the parklet, pay an application fee of \$150 and a permit fee of \$1,133.73, and demonstrate community support. As in San Francisco, key to the success of this measure is that parklets will be permitted for temporary use.

Parklet programs have also migrated to Southern California. As part of a new initiative announced by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, the City of L.A. will create 50 new pocket parks. Ten of these will be located on the sites of foreclosed homes. The City began acquiring vacant homes through the 2009 federal Neighborhood Stabilization Program, but fixing up homes proved costly so the City came up with an alternative — designating 10 of the sites as parks. Long Beach has just initiated its own program — an offer that has already been enthusiastically embraced by three downtown restaurant owners.

This idea really seems to work. One of San Francisco's first and most ambitious parklets was a 2-block installation along Powell Street near Union Square, funded by a corporate donation. It brought a 37% increase in pedestrian traffic during weeknights and a 350% increase in people walking with bicycles during the weekend.

About 25 years ago, the City of Mountain View pioneered its own version of the parklet as part of a downtown revitalization project. Main Street parallel parking spaces were designed to accommodate temporary street furniture and vegetation — should the adjacent business owner choose to use the space in this way. Today, downtown Mountain View streetscapes are a perfect picture of urban vitality, overflowing with visitors and nearby residents throughout the day and evening.

More information and links to San Francisco's ordinance can be found on Green Cities California's web page: <http://www.greencitiescalifornia.org/best-practice/temporary-sidewalk-extension-parklets-san-francisco>.

San Francisco architectural critic John King recently observed about parklets, "It's a design experiment being conducted before our eyes, and it's not going away."

San Joaquin Valley Mayors Take Unusual Leadership, Agree to a Regional Vision: Regional planning is a relatively new enterprise in California — first encouraged by blueprint grants provided to councils of government, then required by SB 375. However, prior to these state initiatives, Stanislaus County cities had begun development of their own regional planning process — mayors voluntarily coming together to discuss issues of common concern.

When he was elected Mayor of Modesto eight years ago, Jim Ridenour initiated a monthly dinner forum for his counterparts from the nine cities of Stanislaus County. Initially, there was no set purpose other than providing a reason for these leaders to get to know one another and discuss the issues and challenges of the day. Over the years, these monthly, informal meetings have led to the development of a sense of trust and common purpose among mayors and provided the groundwork necessary to make regional collaboration work.

For many years, Stanislaus County has been dealing with two competing forces — the need to preserve fertile farmland as an economic base and the need to expand population centers to accommodate more housing and jobs. After nearly eight years of dinner meetings and several changes in mayoral leadership, the mayors — with input from key city staff — have agreed upon a win/win solution. They have developed an impressive series of maps that help pinpoint the areas of growth for each city while protecting prime agricultural land.

In addition to addressing the transportation mandates of SB 375, the maps identify clear boundaries for city growth and make possible future regional collaboration on water and sewer issues. They recognize both the need to protect the region's most valuable economic resource (prime agricultural land) and the need to accommodate population growth by promoting

infill projects and compact development. Copies of maps showing proposed growth limits are available at each municipality's city hall.

In a joint letter to the editor of the *Modesto Bee*, the mayors laid out their common purpose: "Proactive, strategic land use and transportation planning for our nine cities is a step in the right direction. We are committed to lead this endeavor and are prepared to set the pace for proactive and strategic land use and transportation planning for the future. Let us continue in a positive direction by ending the finger pointing and focusing our energy towards this important issue through constructive dialogue."

It's Time to Reserve a Room for the Annual Ahwahnee Conference: The *21st Annual Ahwahnee Conference for Local Elected Officials* will be held March 16-18, 2012 in Yosemite. A special pre-conference session on the future of redevelopment will be offered the evening of March 15th. Room availability cannot be guaranteed after the lodging deadline — Monday, February 13.

This popular event for elected officials brings together a group of about 100 mayors, city councilmembers and county supervisors with a passion for making their communities better and provides them with cutting edge ideas to bring home. Known as the birthplace of the Ahwahnee Principles, this conference has become an annual, must-attend, favorite for many elected officials.

As is our usual practice, this year's agenda is designed to reflect the needs of today. This year's conference topic, *Creating Resilient and Sustainable Economies*, will examine how local governments can create the economy of the future while dealing with serious fiscal constraints.

According to the Chief Economic Strategist for the City of San Jose, Kim Walesh, the loss of redevelopment funds means we must develop partnerships with everyone from businesses, chambers of commerce, and developers to retirees and other community residents who are willing to participate in helping to make their community a better place to live. This is the topic our keynote speaker, Will Fleissig will address. Fleissig, a long time advisor to the LGC, has turned a declining mall in one Colorado city into a fabulous town center, developed the energy self-reliant West Davis Village, and once served as the cutting-edge planning director of Boulder, Colorado.

Public Utilities Commissioner Mark Ferron, a key advisor to the Governor, will explain why the Administration sees energy as an important component of our economic recovery and what the PUC is prepared to do to help local governments take leadership in this area.

To secure lodging, to register and for more conference info, go to www.lgc.org/events.