

# Case-in-Point 2023



## SUMMER IN THE CITY

### A DISCUSSION ON CALGARY'S EXTENDED PATIO PROGRAM

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#### Abstract

Calgary's extended patio program grew out of a need for the hospitality industry to continue operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the program was an economic success and has now become a core component of the urban form of Calgary during the summer months. While the program has been embraced by the community, several elements within the program have been criticized, forcing city staff to reconsider their approach to the

project. With changes being required to the project several different lessons have been identified.

## 1.0 Background & Context

On March 15, 2020, Calgary's municipal government declared a state of local emergency, forcing all non-essential businesses and services to shutter (Newsroom Staff, 2022). The following day the Alberta Government followed suit, declaring a provincial public health state of emergency (Newsroom Staff, 2022). Unbeknownst to Alberta, these two declarations marked the beginning of what would be two challenging years as the province-imposed health restrictions aimed to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus. While the COVID-19 pandemic impacted our entire society, the impact felt by the restaurant and hospitality industry was catastrophic (Statistics Canada, 2021).

The decision to close non-essential businesses in March 2022 would not be the last. Over the following two years, the Alberta Government would restrict access to non-essential businesses, which included the restaurant industry, another three times. When non-essential businesses were allowed to reopen, strict health measures were expected to be followed, which included reduced venue capacities and vaccine passports. While Alberta-specific numbers are unavailable, Statistics Canada has estimated that 86.5% of Canadian food service businesses experienced a loss in revenue between 2019 and 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2021). At the time when Statistics Canada was surveying businesses, 51.2% of respondents indicated that they would be unable to continue operations for an additional six months if the current expenditure levels persisted.

With so many in the restaurant and hospitality industry concerned about the future of their businesses, a need to utilize creative methods to bring in more revenue but also aligning with provincial health regulations was required. One of these approaches was using pop-up or extended patios to increase

*"What we learned through COVID is, 'hey, we kind of like being outside.' And so I think this will last for well beyond the pandemic,"*

- Calgary City Councillor Druh Farrell

the amount of available seating outdoors.

Pop-up or extended patios are an idea from Europe that allows restaurants and other food services to extend their operations into the public right-of-way (CBC News, 2013). This includes both sidewalks and roadways. It should be noted that this case study focuses on Calgary's extended patio program, but multiple communities throughout Canada

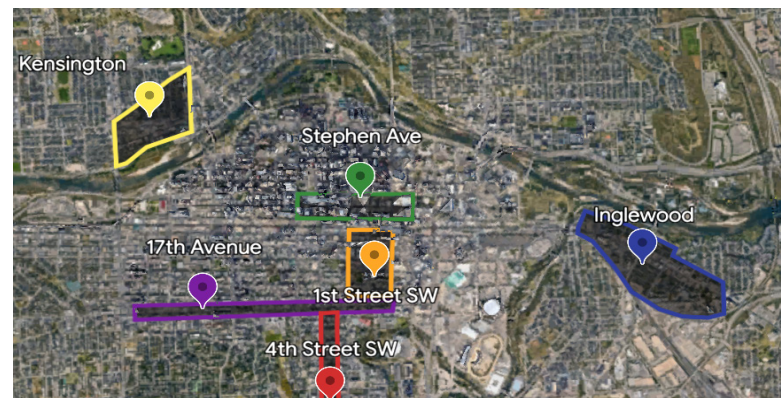


Figure 1: Areas in Calgary with a high density of extended patios (Maddock, 2023)

utilized a similar concept.

## 2.0 Case Summary

The City of Calgary began to allow extended patios in 2012. However, different fees and regulations made it so that the program would only be attractive to a small number of businesses. This was best demonstrated in 2019 as only five patio extensions were approved by the City of Calgary (CBC News,



*“They have been hugely popular to Calgarians and the citizens who have used them throughout COVID-19”*

- Calgary City Councillor Evan Woolley

2013; Sedor, 2023). However, the COVID-19 pandemic compelled the City of Calgary to eliminate the fees and partner with the hospitality industry to immediately rework regulations on how these patios could spill into the public realm. These changes allowed the number of patio extensions to grow to 114 in 2020 before exploding in popularity in 2021, with 219 extensions throughout



Figure 1: Barriers being painted for preparation for the program (Sedor, 2023)

the city (Sedor, 2023). For the 2023 patio season, the city is expecting to process 100 applications for the extensions (Sedor, 2023). The explanation for this drop in applications is due to fewer businesses requiring them for economic survival and the city putting more responsibility onto the businesses with how the patios are constructed (Sedor, 2023). While the extended patio program came out of a need for economic survival, the implementation of the program has drawn

several critiques.

In 2020 several incidents of vehicles crashing into patios extending into the roadways occurred throughout North America (CBC News, 2020; Chapman, 2020). These incidents questioned how safe these spaces could be if they were extending into the lanes of traffic. As a result, the City of Calgary began to install plain concrete traffic barriers at the front and back of the patios. This was done to ensure patrons using these spaces would be protected from potential collision from any vehicles travelling parallel to the patios. While this eased the concern, an incident occurred in Calgary during the 2022 summer season where a minivan collided with the unprotected side of a patio as a result of an accident at a nearby intersection (Gilligan, 2022). According to Andrew Sedor, the program's lead, traffic barriers will now be placed along the sides of the patio for the 2023 season to negate this issue.

The second critique of the program was the aesthetic of the patios. The Department of Traffic Control initially managed the program patios as the extensions often took up roadway space. With this came traffic cones, rope, and uninspiring traffic barriers. However, since the program migrated to the Department of Mobility Operations, the aesthetics of the patios have been transformed. The transformation of the program has been headlined by the partnership with the Beltline Urban Mural Project (BUMP), which has allowed local artists to paint the concrete barriers in the artist's preferred style (Sedor, 2023). With the extended patio program now receiving municipal and federal government funding, the approximately 100 painted barriers can be replaced yearly, with retired barriers being moved elsewhere in the community where needed. The funding has also allowed the program to implement planters on the edges of the patios to introduce vegetation into the urban spaces (Sedor, 2023). Also as part

of the changes in the program regulations, patios now need to be constructed of permanent materials, such as wood. This has also aided curb appeal of the patios (Sedor, 2023).

Unfortunately, the most significant concern with the extended patio program has been the issue of accessibility (Toy, 2022). The patios were initially constructed on the sidewalk, forcing pedestrians to step off onto the roadways every time a patio was encountered before returning to the sidewalk once past the extension. Designing the patios in this manner made it incredibly difficult for those with mobility impediments to navigate (Toy, 2022). For those requiring wheeled devices, wooden ramps were provided. Yet a gap was often present due to the poor interfaces of the sidewalks and roadways, leading to significant safety concerns for those using them. How the ramps were set up also caused accessibility issues due to conflict with how the traffic barriers separating the walkways and passing traffic were erected. The accessibility concern was valid for those using wheeled mobility devices and e-scooter users. However, due to council amendments to the program and the establishment of patio design guidelines, these concerns are expected to be alleviated for the 2023 season (Toy, 2022; City of Calgary, 2023).

However, even before the City of Calgary could address these concerns, the extended patio program was already considered successful among businesses. According to a 2020 survey conducted by the 17th Avenue Business Improvement Area (BIA) group, 98% of businesses with an extended patio during the 2020 summer season considered the program a success. Furthermore, 98% of surveyed businesses declared they would be interested in continuing to construct extended patios when provincial health restrictions were no longer in place (17 Avenue BIA, 2020). Even with changes to

the program over the past two, having approximately 100 applications submitted for extended patios in 2020 demonstrates the success of this program.

## 3.0 Outcomes

### Economic Viability

The 2020 17th Avenue BIA patio extension survey was filled out by 48 businesses, with the results indicating that the extended patio program was an economic success. For example, 22% of respondents stated that 50-100% of their revenue in 2020 came from launching an extended patio, while another 47% indicated that the patio was responsible for 21-50% of their 2020 revenue (17th Avenue BIA, 2020). Unfortunately, the survey did not give respondents a choice to indicate if introducing an extended patio did not lead to any increases in revenue. With the survey not having the option to indicate a 0% increase in revenue, the results of the option of “1-10%” revenue increases should be questioned.

Along with revenue increases, implementing extended patios also led to 61% of respondents adding employees to their



Figure 3: Example of completed extended patio (Sedor, 2023)

staff (17th Avenue BIA, 2020). While 42% of respondents added between 1-5 employees to their staff, 22% of respondents hired between 6-10 new employees (17th Avenue BIA, 2020). Approximately 7% of businesses hired 11-30 individuals, while only 28% of respondents indicated no new hires after launching the extended patios (17th Avenue BIA, 2020). While it is presumed that most of these hires were individuals previously employed before the pandemic began, the ability of the patio extensions to decrease unemployment during a time of fluctuation is significant.

In addition, 80% of respondents indicated that the extended patio program allowed the businesses to pay rent and taxes that might not have otherwise been possible. While changes have altered the program for the 2023 season, having approximately 100 applicants indicates that patio extensions are economically viable for Calgary eateries.

### **Parking Space Reductions**

Like most cities, Calgary is exploring different policies to reduce the supply of parking to help encourage the use of other modes of transportation (City of Calgary, 2020; City of

Calgary, 2021). For example, the extended patio program has allowed the city to eliminate approximately 2-3 parking spaces in the parking lane. With 100 applicants in 2023, this adds up to 200-300 spaces that could be eliminated during the summer season. While this could be a concern for local businesses, the 17th Avenue BIA survey presented the opposite, as 80% of respondents indicated that the removal of parking had little to no impact on patrons accessing their building.

## **4.0 Lessons Learned**

### **Time & Place**

One thing that came out of the extended patio program is that some locations do not make sense to build extensions. An example of this was an extended patio constructed in a lane of Edmonton Trail in Calgary (Sedor, 2023). This restaurant's patio was the only one located along Edmonton Trail, a major roadway in the city. It did not make sense for a single patio to enter the roadway, forcing traffic to narrow to a single lane before returning to its normal flow of two lanes. Instead, patio extensions that spill into the roadway should be designated for places with a high concentration of restaurants and bars. If a business outside these areas is interested in launching a patio, finding alternative locations will be required.

### **Importance of Accessible Design**

Universal design not only serves the needs of individuals with disabilities but broadly has a positive impact on the population as a whole (Salah & Chung, 2013). The decision to construct the patios more permanently has allowed the program to remove the ramps, allowing individuals to move in a flat and straight route. For individuals with accessibility concerns, this is a necessity, but for individuals without impediments, these permanent structures allow for a more enjoyable walking spaces along these spaces.

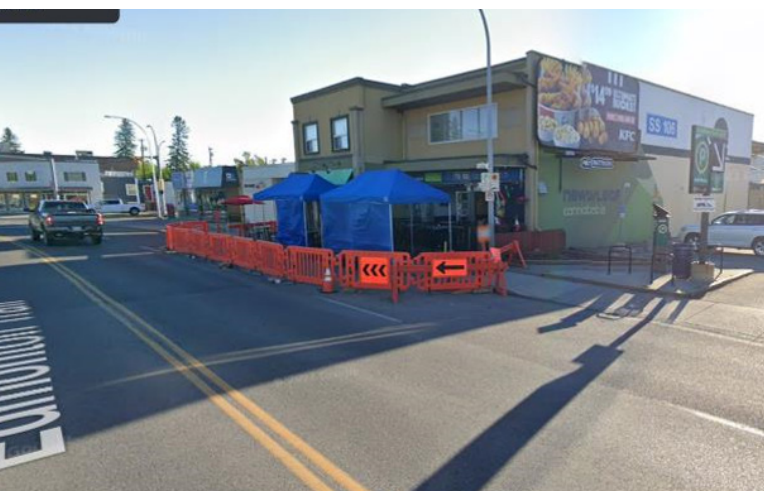


Figure 4: Bad Placement of Extended Patio (Sedor, 2023)



To further increase the accessibility of these spaces, the Department of Mobility Operations has begun to explore the use of bicycle and e-scooter parking at the front of a series of patios to eliminate the potential for collisions to occur between vehicles and pedestrians (Sedor, 2023).

### **The Use of Public Art**

The decision to partner with BUMP to begin painting the traffic barriers along the outside edge of the patios has been a great success in several ways. The partnership has allowed the work of local artists to have significantly more exposure in the public realm than before. Creating this exposure has led to a waitlist forming for artists interested in displaying their expressions onto the traffic barriers. However, the most critical element these art pieces have done is establishing stronger community cohesion. It was found that the plain traffic barriers initially implemented with the patios were often tagged by vandals resulting in the decreased aesthetic appeal of patios (Sedor, 2023). Since introducing these painted barriers into the program, only a small number have been vandalized, indicating the art is now a valuable element of the community that individuals want to preserve for the public space (Sedor, 2023).

### **Dialogue Between City & Businesses Needed**

With the city beginning to change how the program is implemented, there is a need for dialogue between the city and businesses to exist. Both parties want these spaces included in the urban fabric moving forward. However, a myriad of additional possibilities exists if the dialogue between the two stakeholders continues to broaden.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

Calgary's extended patio program was originally introduced out of a need to ensure local businesses to can continue operations.

Yet these patio extensions have now grown into an essential element of Calgary streets in the summer months. Moving forward, it is expected that the city and local businesses will continue collaborating to build on the program's current success.

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