

Pedestrian Friendly Infrastructure a Winning Solution

By Thomas Beck, AIA, NCARB

Temporary implementation of a major pedestrian friendly infrastructure in downtown Estes Park may be exactly what is needed to convince detractors of the worth of a pedestrian mall, or to prove them right in their opinion that it will hurt, rather than help, their businesses.

Pedestrian malls are incubators of social interaction in good times, and solutions for social distancing in our current times. During this extraordinary time of pandemic, we must take exceptional precautions to ensure public safety, while inviting visitors to bring much needed business to our town. By temporarily implementing a pedestrian mall with a one-way emergency lane, restaurants could utilize more outdoor space to gradually return to dine-in service. Retailers could interact with passers-by, even completing sales with available portable technologies without customers having to enter the tight spaces of their store interiors. A unique opportunity for personal, custom services may well be a silver lining born of the need to social distance. The Town could implement the closure as soon as public works could coordinate new signage and access controls, and leave it closed until after the Thanksgiving parade.

Anyone who has been here for much time knows that when thunderstorms strike in the park, the town fills up with the visitors chased out by the weather. Campers seek a little civilization, families look for a snack outside of the vacation home, couples on a romantic getaway enjoy a meal, and tourists shop for unique items to commemorate their visit.

Thunderstorms also bring sudden water run off down streets and sidewalks. In the long term, a permanent construct could help channel water through the center of Elkhorn, creating flood control that could save business owners' properties in future flood events. A Zen rock garden style dry creek bed in the middle of two blocks of Elkhorn Ave could help solve downtown floodplain design issues. Presumably, this would lower future FEMA flood insurance premiums to property owners. It might also provide a vehicle for funding the project through the federal government's flood mitigation program.

Well placed handicap accessible parking and a close downtown parking structure could allay fears of less mobile visitors having access in a pedestrian mall scenario. Or manned vehicles could be specifically purposed for helping transport the mobility challenged much like is done in airports. The emergency vehicle access lane could be used by shuttle buses much like the Denver mall allows transit buses.

Pedestrian malls that are successful have high volumes of tourist traffic generated by something other than the mall. We have this via Rocky Mountain National Park. Successful pedestrian mall projects exist primarily in towns with populations of less than 100,000. They succeed in cities with dense urban cores, with people who live in them. We do not currently have a great deal of year-round residents downtown, but a denser more livable downtown should be encouraged to create a more walkable downtown in all seasons.

Which is preferable, a tourist stuck in traffic looking at a shop's window, or a tourist able to walk right in and buy something? Let's give an Elkhorn pedestrian mall a try!

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