



CITY OF FALLS CHURCH

DATE: November 14, 2017

TO: Mayor Tarter and Members of City Council

FROM: Citizens Advisory Committee on Transportation (CACT)

SUBJECT: Consideration of Incorporating Parklets into the City's Streetscape Elements Plan

Introduction

Staff requested that the CACT review the suitability of incorporating into the City's Streetscape Elements plan the concept of "parklets," which the [National Association of City Transportation Officials \(NATCO\)](#) defines as public seating platforms that convert curbside parking spaces or underutilized public spaces into vibrant community spaces. The concept of the Parklet got its start in San Francisco in the early 2000's. Since then the idea has spread and most recently, in this area, the Arlington County Board with the Rosslyn Business Improvement District, approved this past June specifications for the county's first permanent parklet in the Rosslyn Streetscape Elements Plan (see [New Look for Rosslyn Sidewalks](#)). The prototype is planned for installation in Spring 2018 and will include benches, planters, a bike rack, a newsbox corral, an informational marker and litter bins all designed with the same "custom, laser-cut pattern emulating Rosslyn's nighttime skyline."



(Note: the Rosslyn Streetscape Elements Master Plan with the design features and installation plans may be found at: https://arlingtonva.s3.dualstack.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2017/05/Rossllyn-Streetscape-Elements-Plan_Draft-RTA-May-2017_lowres-1.pdf)

Common Features

While the design and placement of parklets seems to vary depending on the municipality (e.g. Seattle, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Minneapolis). The parameters determining their success seem to be consistent:

- Most parklets have a locally distinctive design that incorporates seating, greenery, and bike racks to accommodate unmet demand for public space on thriving neighborhood retail streets or commercial areas.
- Most parklets are the product of a partnership between the municipality/city and local businesses, residents, or neighborhood associations.
- A study in Philadelphia conducted by a nonprofit neighborhood development organization, the [University City District](#), found that two parameters emerged as the strongest predictors of parklet success: 1) the modest interior seating capacity within a main adjacent business, coupled with high turnover of that same interior seating and 2) large windows on the main adjacent business, which helped to foster a sense of connection between the business interior and the exterior parklet space.
- The University City District study also found that the parklets attracted a roughly even mix of men and women, which was interpreted as indicating that the parklets were perceived as “safe and welcoming spaces.” The study’s authors also noted that about 20 -30 percent of users were not customers of an adjacent businesses, a statistic which may address concerns that the creation of parklets removes street space from the public realm for the sole benefit of a private business.

What Can Parklets Achieve:

According to the University City District study, that analyzed detailed observations of six Philadelphia parklets during the 2013 season, the following positive impacts on the neighborhoods were observed:

- Parklets located directly outside certain types of businesses appear to foster a dynamic that can bring a neighborhood together: families were observed stopping for dinner or snacks, lingering to socialize, which attracted passing acquaintances to stop and chat (e, g., one parklet in particular- a 240-square-foot space located outside a taco shop and a popsicle store in a medium-density residential area was reported to have attracted as many as 150 individual users in a single day).
- Most of the Philadelphia parklets were located outside restaurants, so eating, drinking, and talking with others appeared to be the most common activities. However, in one location, a parklet outside a café, more solitary pursuits such as reading or writing were observed.

- There were many anecdotal reports about the parklets from business owners—one business owner said sales were up so much he had to hire new workers. Overall, the University City District Study cited a 20 percent increase in sales in the two weeks following a parklet installation, based on reports from participating businesses.

Location Considerations

Safety: is typically the most important consideration in siting a parklet. Parklet locations are typically evaluated and chosen so all parklet locations keep sightlines clear for people on streets and sidewalks. As a result, while corner locations provide great visibility for the parklet, the closer the parklet is sited to a corner, the more likely that site is potentially going to adversely impact pedestrian and driver visibility. A parklet's location along a block will also impact how tall it can be and the design features it can include without affecting public safety.

Neighborhood Context (i.e. the type of neighborhood will support the parklet): Parklets are reported to work best in places where people frequently walk. For a parklet to be successful, people will need to notice it and use it, so in siting a parklet it is important to observe how people are using the public space, e.g. when are people walking on the street and where they might like to stop for a while. Where sidewalks are narrow they may serve to provide some “supplemental space” for pedestrians.

Aside from the physical elements of the site for the parklet, it is also important to identify a location where the parklet will be embraced and enjoyed by the community. While it is unlikely that permission to site a parklet requires the unanimous approval of all the neighbors, everyone should be contacted in the planning stages to let them know what is being proposed in their neighborhood. The more support the parklet enjoys from nearby neighbors, the more likely the parklet will be viewed as a public amenity that the community is willing to help to design, fund, and maintain it.

Possible Problems and Responses

- A simple scan of the internet reveals that parklets are not without problems, typically in the category of “public nuisances” like public intoxication and littering. Overall though, it appears that parklets have been well-received in communities all over the U.S.
- Since most parklets are the product of a partnership between the city, local businesses, residents, and neighborhood associations, the resulting shared sense of “ownership” of the parklet can contribute to a willingness for third-party “policing” of the site by businesses and private individuals. This can help lessen the burden on law enforcement to provide continuous nuisance abatement and will help to maintain the parklet's sense of being a safe and welcoming space.

Conclusion

The CACT believes that well-sited parklets would be desirable assets for Falls Church, effectively converting on-street parking to small public parks, open and accessible to all. As in other cities, the CACT expects that parklets would increase foot traffic and possibly revenues for adjacent businesses.

