

Strategy: Support quality storefront design and sidewalk activity

Develop storefront & sidewalk activation design guidelines

Project Category

- Organizational Capacity
- Branding + Marketing
- Public Realm
- Private Realm Redevelopment

Guiding Principles

- Investing in Place
- Creating business-friendly regulatory frameworks
- Promoting and marketing Vienna
- Creating a live-work-play Avenue Center district

Priority Nodes



Estimated Time + Cost



Why is this critical?

When well-designed, storefronts and their adjacent frontage zones can improve a shopper's overall impression of the Town. At this time, however, local businesses reported facing a range of difficulties in navigating Town permitting processes without a point person to reach out to for all business-related affairs and, in particular, challenges understanding rules around storefront design and signage.

Beyond the desire to streamline sign permitting processes that currently include additional approvals from the Board of Architectural Review, many business owners also acknowledged the need for clarity and transparency on sign regulations that may in turn limit the need to rely on a point person for signage and storefront design-related challenges.

How do we ensure businesses leverage allowable storefront design and sidewalk activations?

In addition to allowing blade signs and easing restrictions on frontage activation, the Town's Board of Architectural Review (BAR) should also **develop design guidelines that include illustrations and simple graphics that outline sign regulations, as well as recommended signage designs**. These guidelines should be **hosted on a dedicated 'Storefront Design' page** on the Town's website in order to remain accessible to business owners. The web page should also **identify local sign or street furniture manufacturers** that have previously worked with the Town on successful installations to serve as a resource to business owners considering new sign designs and installations. Other useful resources that should be included on the 'Storefront

Design' web page **include best practice/model installations from existing Town businesses**, as well as any available Town and County **grants and funding resources for storefront improvements** (see page 21 for commercial storefront improvement incentives).

In addition, the 'Storefront Design' web page should include an online application form for digital processing and include an up-to-date calendar of BAR meetings and approval dates so that potential applicants are aware of likely time frame for processing.

The NYC Department of Small Business Services developed a Guide to Storefront Design to help translate the complex layers of sign regulations embedded within the City's zoning code to local stakeholders who may not have the technical understanding needed to comply with City rules.

Who can help lead/support this project?

The Board of Architectural Review should develop storefront and sidewalk activation design guidelines in partnership with Department of Planning and Zoning and local business stakeholders (including the Town Business Liaison Committee), as well as local architects with retail/food & beverage consulting portfolio in the region.

The guidelines should be made available to print or for viewing digitally, and should be rooted in local sign regulations and rely heavily on simple graphics/illustrations that are easily understood by the general public. The guidelines should serve as a standalone document that should not require a business owner to also separately refer to the zoning ordinance in order to be compliant.



Allow outdoor dining and create self-certification permit program

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Why is this critical?

Outdoor dining has grown through the pandemic as retailers across the country were restricted from being able to serve customers indoors. In Vienna, many food & beverage businesses located in shopping center properties have leveraged this opportunity and have invested in outdoor dining areas as allowed on private sidewalks and/or private parking areas. These waivers, however, did not allow spillover retail/restaurant activity on sidewalks or on-street parking spaces that, in many other jurisdictions, have proven to contribute to business sales (during the pandemic) and overall district vibrancy. Small businesses in Town have expressed concern over unfair limitations built into the existing outdoor dining program that should be addressed more permanently.

In fact, in many of Vienna's competitive districts - including Mosaic District, Falls Church, and Old Town Alexandria, significant deregulation has been undertaken to allow for outdoor dining in the public right-of-way including on sidewalks, parking spaces, and entire roadways.

As cities across the region and country begin to develop policies around permanent outdoor dining configurations, **it is important for Vienna to similarly consider the extension and permanence of its outdoor dining permits in order to compete with dining experiences that customers now expect** of commercial districts and downtowns. Eligibility should also be expanded to account for the variety of building and public realm typologies that are adjacent to commercial spaces.

How should a permanent outdoor dining program be designed fairly?

First, the Town should **extend outdoor dining permits to allow for outdoor dining on adjacent on-street parking spaces** (now widely known as streateries). At the time of publication, Town Planning & Zoning, Economic Development, Planning Commission, and Town Council are working together to design a permanent outdoor dining program. A final approval for the program will be made in November 2021.

With the expansion and permanence of the permit program, the Town should also **develop clear guidelines that address the variety of outdoor dining setups that are eligible through the program** (which may include on-street parking spaces, private parking lots, travel lanes, alleys, etc.)

With clear guidelines and regulations, the Town may also **consider a self-certification process that in the long-term lowers reliance on Town and County staff** time and capacity for permit approvals. The Town has already engaged in discussion with County Fire Marshal to establish a self-certification process.

The self-certification process, however, may only be successful with clear rules and regulations that cannot be easily misinterpreted by either user or enforcer.

Who can help lead/support this project?

Although Town Planning and Zoning should continue to oversee application submissions, with the development of an outdoor dining guideline document, other Town staff may support with responses to any queries posed by business applicants. The Town Manager will also continue to have the authority to issue permits until a self-certification process is enacted.

With a self-certification process, Code Enforcement officers may assume responsibility for issuance of any fines or permit revocations for non-compliant outdoor dining setups (based on published program guidelines and requirements).