

CITY OF SANTA ROSA
CITY COUNCIL

TO: MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL
FROM: GABE OSBURN, DIRECTOR, PLANNING AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT
SUBJECT: STUDY SESSION FOR TEMPORARILY CLOSING PORTIONS OF
FOURTH STREET

AGENDA ACTION: STUDY SESSION

RECOMMENDATION

The Planning and Economic Development Department recommends that the Council hold a study session for Council to receive information, ask questions, and provide direction related to the various policies, procedures and options associated with temporarily closing portions of city streets, including Fourth Street.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of this study session is to provide the City Council with an overview of the opportunities and challenges associated with street closures and pedestrianization, and to present the findings and alternatives identified through staff's due diligence. The Council will be asked to provide staff with recommendations and provide direction on how to proceed.

GOAL

This item relates to Council Goal #3 - Promote Citwide Economic Development. It also relates to goals identified in the adopted April 2024 Economic Development Strategic Plan. Specifically, to "Bolster Downtown housing, commercial and retail business", "Support a thriving economy", and "Support walkable neighborhoods".

BACKGROUND/PRIOR COUNCIL REVIEW

On April 9, 2024 (File #24-0315), Mayor Natalie Rogers requested a future agenda item to discuss the impacts of temporarily closing portions of Fourth Street. A motion was passed 5–1 to approve placement of a discussion item on a future agenda concerning the impacts of temporarily closing portions of Fourth Street.

In response, staff have undertaken a comprehensive effort to assess community perspectives on street closures as a whole and to understand the impacts of pedestrianization efforts in Santa Rosa's downtown.

This process has included one-on-one outreach to downtown business owners, commercial real estate brokers, and business support organizations, as well as focused feedback sessions with the business community. Broader civic engagement has also included a public sentiment survey, a business-specific survey, and input from community groups. The topic has also been discussed in the Economic Development Subcommittee to provide additional opportunities for public comment.

In addition to outreach efforts, staff also reviewed past pedestrianization efforts in Santa Rosa, including Comstock Mall, and studied similar initiatives in other communities such as Grass Valley (CA), Charlottesville (VA), and Madison (WI). Interviews with leaders from these cities helped identify best practices and potential challenges. Similarly, staff conducted interviews with other city departments to better understand operational insights.

RELATED PROGRAMS OR POLICIES

Downtown Station Area Specific Plan October 2020
Santa Rosa General Plan 2050

ANALYSIS

Through the engagement efforts as defined above, staff has found that general public interest in street closures and pedestrianization is notably high. Many residents expressed enthusiasm for transforming sections of downtown into walkable, plaza-style spaces that promote community gathering, recreation, and cultural vibrancy. These participants viewed pedestrian zones as potential enhancements to Santa Rosa's livability and as a way to stimulate economic activity in select areas.

Conversely, feedback from the business community was predominantly opposed to pedestrianization, particularly in areas along Fourth Street. Concerns cited include:

- Logistical challenges related to product deliveries and loading zones.
- Reduced access for customers who rely on nearby parking or have mobility limitations.
- Limited applicability to businesses that are not oriented toward food, beverage, or entertainment—i.e., the business types that typically benefit from foot traffic in a pedestrian zone.

An interesting finding did emerge during outreach efforts: businesses located on Ross Street showed strong support for exploring pedestrianization. These stakeholders shared ideas for piloting a closure in their area and saw it as an opportunity to enhance visibility, attract customers, and create a community-centric atmosphere. This contrast

suggests that community and business alignment may vary by location and underscores the importance of a tailored approach.

If the City Council wishes to pursue this concept further, staff recommends the following next steps to better evaluate feasibility and impacts:

- Infrastructure Analysis: Assess the physical and operational impacts of temporary or permanent street closures.
- Traffic and Parking Study: Evaluate how closures would affect circulation patterns, parking availability, and access for deliveries and emergency services.
- Cost/Revenue Analysis: Project both the financial costs of implementation and any potential revenue generation or economic uplift associated with pedestrianization.

Alternatively, Council may consider piloting a pedestrianization effort in an area with strong support from both residents and businesses—such as Ross Street—before broader application. This phased approach could provide real-world insights and minimize potential disruption.

Lastly, staff suggests that any future exploration also include an analysis of formalized entertainment zones, where open consumption of food and beverage is permitted. Cities that have seen successful pedestrianization efforts often have designated entertainment districts where the primary economic drivers are food, drink, and performance-based businesses.

While this study session does not include a firm staff recommendation, staff is seeking Council's feedback and guidance on how to proceed with potential temporary street closures in Santa Rosa's downtown.

FISCAL IMPACT

Except for staff time dedicated to this project and work performed in accordance with the Economic Development Strategy, conducting a study session on this topic does not have a fiscal impact on the General Fund.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15378, the recommended action is not a "project" subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) because the proposed action involves only informational discussion and policy direction, and it does not have a potential for resulting in either a direct physical change in the environment or a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment. In the alternative, the recommended action is exempt from CEQA pursuant to CEQA Guidelines section 15061(b)(3) because it can be seen with certainty that there is no possibility that the recommended action may have a significant effect on the environment.

BOARD/COMMISSION/COMMITTEE REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This matter was presented, along with the survey results, for discussion to the Economic Development Sub Committee on 06/09/2025

NOTIFICATION

Not applicable.

ATTACHMENTS

- Attachment 1 – Correspondence

PRESENTER(S)

Gabe Osburn, Director, Planning and Economic Development
Scott Adair, Chief Economic Development Officer, Economic Development Division