



Downtown Idea Exchange

Improving physical, social, and economic conditions downtown

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ECONOMIC GROWTH

Outdoor kiosks breathe new life into long-dormant space

When downtown boosters in tiny Tionesta, PA (est. pop. 326), suggested activating a long-vacant lot by using garden sheds as outdoor kiosks, the reaction was mixed.

Some wondered if downtown Tionesta would simply be home to a flea market. One wag derided the concept as “sheds on sleds.”

Seven years later, the Tionesta Market Village is a success. Gov. Tom Wolf visited in 2017 as part of a tour of Pennsylvania’s small towns. Seeking a low-cost way to inject life into struggling downtowns, Conneautville, PA (est. pop. 721), and Coudersport,

PA (est. pop. 2,699), both adopted the concept.

For the 2020 season, Tionesta’s tenants included a bakery, a barbecue place, a jeweler, a candy shop, a winery, and a gardening store.

The concept was born from desperation, says Farley Wright, president of the Forest County Industrial Development Corp. A downtown building burned to the ground in the early 2000s, and the vacant lot languished as Tionesta residents waited for an investor to take an interest.

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ATTRACTION

Seven strategies for salvaging the holiday shopping season

During the coronavirus recession, American consumers turned away from brick-and-mortar retail and toward online shopping. It’s a trend that doesn’t bode well for downtown retail activity heading into November and December.

To salvage the holiday shopping season, downtown leaders must be realistic about the conflicting trends that are roiling consumer behavior, says Matthew Wagner, vice presi-

dent of revitalization programs at the National Main Street Center.

On the one hand, the monthslong pandemic will have many consumers craving the comfortable experience of shopping in a quaint downtown. On the other hand, persistent fears about COVID-19 will push many to avoid in-person shopping.

Wagner points to consumer surveys showing a significant number *(Continued on page 5)*

ATTRACTION

District-wide approach to outdoor dining

Marco Li Mandri, who runs San Diego's Little Italy Association, admits he was stunned by the coronavirus pandemic.

"No one knows how to deal with this," he says. "We've never had a situation where we've been confronted with the entire economy shutting down."

After the initial shock, Li Mandri got creative. His district has survived the COVID-19 shutdown by enthusiastically embracing outdoor dining.

When the state of California extended its stay-at-home order and clamped down on indoor dining, the business improvement district just north of downtown responded with an outdoor dining campaign.

Known as Ciao Bella, the program has been a success, says Li Mandri, chief executive administrator of the Little Italy Association. In fact, the program is such a success that Li Mandri expects closed streets and al fresco dining to become a "semi-permanent" feature in the district.

In June, Little Italy became the first neighborhood in San Diego to close streets for open-air dining. The Little Italy Association also advocated for parklets.

After the city signed off in July, the Little Italy Association installed several hundred linear feet of barriers for two dozen restaurants.

Today, 33 restaurants have created parklets, an addition that opens nearly 25,000 square feet to serve patrons outside. Li Mandri says he has taken pains to make the outdoor dining look good.

For instance, the Little Italy Association provided not just railings but also railing covers.

"When people are looking up the street, it looks uniform," he says. "It doesn't look like everyone is doing their own thing."

Li Mandri says many downtown leaders have scrambled to set up outdoor dining areas — but without paying attention to those details.

"Most are doing outdoor dining, but it's not really coordinated, so it can look kind of junky," he says.

To fund the program, the Little Italy Association collects \$50 from each restaurant for each night that streets are closed to traffic.

"It's about \$400 a month — which they're going to make, easily," Li Mandri says. "They don't mind paying it."

The fee simply covers the business improvement district's costs of administering the program, Li Mandri says.

When his district launched Ciao Bella, Li Mandri shut down streets to vehicle traffic three nights a week — on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. However, three nights of street closings proved disruptive, so now the street dining takes place on Fridays and Saturdays.

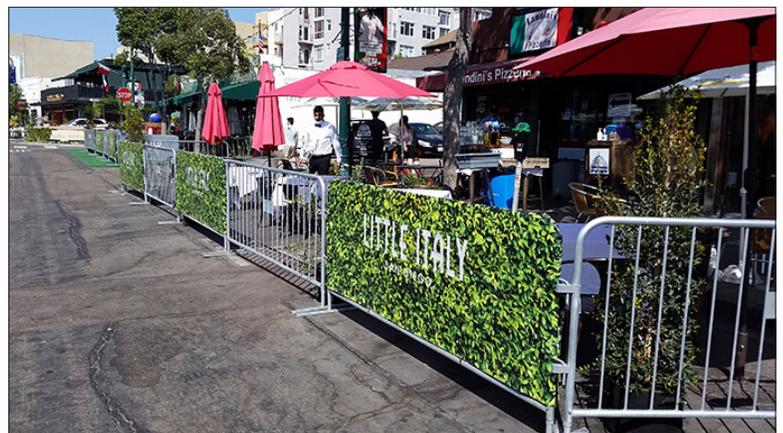
"We know that when we shut down a street, it creates a whole other set of problems," Li Mandri says. "Any place operating on pickup can't do it any more."

Parking hasn't been an issue, he says. There's a 700-space parking garage that patrons can use, and many diners use Uber, Lyft, or the public trolley.

"Without the outdoor dining," Li Mandri says, "we'd be flat on our back or out of business."

Contact: Marco Li Mandri, [Little Italy Association](#), 619-233-3898. **DIX**

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Visitors enjoy outdoor dining at San Diego's Little Italy.