

Report on the State Street Pedestrian Mall Experiment

Initial review draft – November 4, 2024

Introduction

In June 2023, Metro’s Transit Network Redesign project shifted routes off the 400-600 blocks of State Street. The removal of busses from these blocks spurred a community conversation about what could happen on those blocks. Many raised the possibility of creating a pedestrian mall, pointing to examples such as Pearl Street in Boulder, CO or Church Street in Burlington, VT. Initial conversations with various City agencies and business and neighborhood groups were facilitated by the Downtown Coordinating Committee (DCC). On September 5, 2023, Common Council passed [RES-23-00554](#), which directed staff to prepare an experimental pedestrian mall and street closure plan for the summer of 2024.

Shortly thereafter, Planning Division staff began development of an initial pedestrian mall concept design, based on the lessons learned from agency conversations as well as those with area businesses and residents. #FlockToState envisioned the addition of benches and planters in the street, street painting and art elements with a flamingo theme, a nod to the Plastic Pink Flamingos (the City’s official bird) which fill nearby Bascom Hill.

That concept was presented at a public meeting held on December 4, 2023, where it was met with general support. The concept was refined over the next several months before being finalized in the spring of 2024. At the same time, staff worked to establish times when State Street would be fully close to vehicles. After surveying businesses, property owners and residents on those blocks, the closure period was set after 3:00 pm on weekdays and after 10:00 am on weekends. On May 8, 2024, a ribbon tying event was held, signifying the street as officially closed to traffic and open to people. The experiment officially ended on October 30, 2024.

This report summarizes the results and lessons learned from the State Street Pedestrian Mall Experiment. It is intended to inform any future pedestrian enhancements on those blocks or others in the downtown area that may be reconstructed in the future.

Review of Elements

The following section discusses each element of the closure which the City controlled or influenced.

Street Painting

Street painting was originally conceived as a relatively low-cost way to add color, art and interest to the roadway, encouraging pedestrian activity during street closure periods. The

street painting plan included four 20 ft. diameter artist designed and painted medallions, and smaller stencils ranging from two to eight feet. The stencils were originally conceived as a risk mitigation strategy; a way color and designs could quickly be added to the street in the event inclement spring weather conflicted with planned artist-led painting days. However, an idea for a public painting event utilizing stencils led to one of the most successful events of the Pedestrian Mall experiment (even though it occurred officially before the ribbon tying event). On April 21, over 600 volunteers descended on the three blocks of State Street, transforming the roadway into a canvas of bright colors and designs using 60 gallons of concrete paint.

Within a few weeks sections of paint began to peel. In some areas peeling was relatively minor, but it was extensive in others. At first, it appeared certain colors were more prone to peeling than others. However, a more detailed evaluation of wear locations suggested oil or other residue on the street was the primary cause of paint peeling. Areas with high wear included the followings:

- At intersections where oil drips from stopped vehicles would be concentrated
- Near food and beverage-oriented businesses where liquids in refuse (aka “garbage juice”) was common and leaked on the street during collection
- The south side of the road, which is slightly lower so potentially more impacted by drainage of surface contaminants.

Some surface preparation occurred in advance of street painting, but it clearly was not enough in certain areas. Touching up or fully repainting designs was discussed in the summer. In order for reapplied paint to adhere better, pressure washing or other street cleaning would be needed. This cleaning would likely damage the remaining paint, which would be especially problematic for the detailed artist-painted medallions. Touching up stencils would be easier, but their simplicity and quantity minimized the visual impact of wear. Ultimately, it was decided not to repaint the street.

Street Painting Key Lessons:

- Improve surface preparation by either pressure washing or using a street scrubbing machine. Coordinate the timing of surface preparation and painting to prevent recontamination of the street surface from daily deliveries or refuse pick up.
- Primarily utilize stencils, rather than larger and more detailed designs.
- Thermoplastic could be used for more permanent graphics like the Progress Pride image at the top of State Street. However, it is significantly more expensive than street paint, and its durability would necessitate deciding on a more permanent theme for the street.

Flamingo Sculptures

The flamingo sculptures are relatively simple design, prepared in-house and fabricated locally out of powder coated half-inch steel. Initially planned to be mounted on planters and placed in the street, concerns about weight and tipping led to their placement on the

sidewalk. They are mounted directly to the sidewalk using four heavy-duty concrete screws. One flamingo required its mounting screws to be retightened, but otherwise they've proven to be very durable over the course of the summer. There have been few instances of graffiti or stickers being placed on them. After consultation with Mall Concourse Maintenance (MCM), there are no plans to remove them.

Flamingo Sculptures Key Lessons:

- The flamingo sculptures made a significant visual impact, at a relatively low cost with little ongoing maintenance.
- Relatively small footprint made them easy to work around and limited extra work for Mall Concourse Maintenance.

Street Furniture

The pedestrian mall experiment added approximately six benches in the street per block, placed at the curb, parallel to the street. These were intended to visually reinforce that the roadway was a pedestrian space during the times of the closure and provide additional public seating on State Street. They were placed in pairs, directly across from each other, creating a slight narrowing of the roadway to encourage lower vehicle speeds when allowed on State Street. This placement pattern also reduced potential conflicts with fire truck outriggers compared to a staggered pattern. A planter was placed before each bench (in the direction of travel) to increase the comfort and safety of those sitting on the benches.

Street furniture options were shortlisted based on the following criteria:

- It should be made of concrete, since metal furniture would be less durable if hit by a vehicle.
- It should be difficult to tip over since it would not be bolted to the roadway.
- Benches and planters needed to be relatively narrow to avoid encroaching into the fire lane.
- Planters should have flat sides to be wrapped with graphics.
- The furniture would need to be delivered on time, with approximately 12-16 weeks lead time.

Based on these criteria, a limited number of options were presented to DCC for consideration, and the final models were selected shortly thereafter. A dark gray finish was selected, based on our understanding that gray finishes worked better with graffiti clean-up than other colors.

When the furniture arrived, MCM staff noticed the benches did not have lift points for a standard forklift. This resulted in some of the benches being damaged slightly during installation. The Parks Division does have a monument lift which could be used, but it's not something that is easily accessible to MCM staff.

The very first day the furniture was placed on State Street, one bench was hit by a delivery truck. Staff anticipated the furniture would be hit at some point during the summer, but the near daily vehicle strikes occurred with far greater frequency than expected. The strikes would often push benches away from the curb, requiring MCM to move them back into their original positions.

The lower profile designs may have made them difficult for truck drivers to see once trucks pulled over. Further, the quantity of delivery vehicles and the impatience of drivers lead to many strikes in the early morning hours. The planters were wrapped with bright graphics, which improved their visibility, but vehicle strikes continued regularly. The wraps featured the stencil art used on the street, along with a QR Code linking to FlockToState.com, where people could find more information about the experiment, upcoming events, and submit feedback via survey.

As the summer went on, benches became targets of chalk graffiti, which did not damage the benches but required frequent cleaning by MCM staff. Certain benches were heavily used by skateboarders. While this was somewhat expected, pedestrians were not able to use those benches while skateboarders were present, benches sustained minor damage.

While benches were often struck by delivery vehicles in the morning, they appeared to be well used during other times, particularly at the noon hour and during street closure times. The high utilization of benches is not surprising given the lack of other public seating options in those blocks. Over the years, many benches have been removed from State Street. Prior to the Pedestrian Mall Experiment, there were only 2 benches remaining on the 500 and 600 blocks of State Street.

Drought resistant grasses and plants were selected for the street planters to reduce watering demands. However, MCM staff could not accommodate watering these planters within their normal shifts. Operating funds allocated to the Planning Division for the Pedestrian Mall Experiment paid for MCM overtime hours needed for watering.

Street Furniture Key Lessons:

- Benches were well used and directed pedestrian activity to the roadway during periods of closure.
- Benches and planters were struck by vehicles frequently. High volumes of delivery vehicles early in the morning appeared to create the most incidents.
- The low-profile designs of the benches and planters were attractive and functional but may have contributed to vehicle strikes.
- Pinch points from placing benches directly across the street from each other may have contributed to the number of vehicle strikes.
- With the existing traffic pattern on State Street, future installation of furniture in the roadway is not recommended.

Barricades

The street end water-filled barricades, wrapped in graphics showing closure hours, were a late addition to the Pedestrian Mall Experiment. The design concept anticipated using planters as a visual and physical deterrent to traffic using the street. When the planters arrived, the design did not seem large enough to ensure vehicles or cyclists saw them, and an alternative would be needed. The water-filled barricades made a greater visual impact on the inbound traffic lane that could be moved if necessary.

Barricades Key Lessons:

- The concept of semi-permanent features at intersections to visually block in-bound vehicles was successful, but staff erred on size of features.
- The water-filled barricades were heavy enough to not be pushed around by individuals but could be moved as necessary by MCM staff.

Programming and Activation

Throughout preparation for the Pedestrian Mall Experiment, staff noted the City did not have capacity to plan events and activities on State Street. Responsibility for programming would fall to Madison's Central Business Improvement District (BID). The City provides the BID with approximately \$55,000-65,000 for annual operating funds, but did not allocate any additional funds for programming the pedestrian mall.

The BID supported approximately 40 events over the summer, including recurring events and onetime events. All events were listed on the BID's website, which was linked from the QR codes on furniture wraps. Many of the events were focused in Peace Park on the 400 block of State. Events in the street often had to contend with cyclist using State Street or the occasional vehicle disregarding closure hours.

The most popular events continued to be the Madison Night Market, which included the pedestrian mall as well as other blocks of State Street. Specialty events promoted with targeted social media advertising were also heavily attended. Events generally featured and relied on time and resources from businesses in the State Street and downtown area. Certain businesses ran with this model to craft events featuring their products or services. Others were more reluctant to commit resources, and as a result expected events or event series did not occur. Events targeting children were not as successful as other activities. This may be due to few other destinations or activities appealing to young children in the immediate area. Music and entertainment events however were generally successful at bringing people to State Street.

The City created a dedicated busking spot on State Street at Frances Street Plaza to add music to the pedestrian mall. Musicians were able to sign up for a time slot via QR code located there and utilize power from the nearby light pole. Over the summer, the BID utilized the space 9 times, but no other permits were issued. It is possible musicians used the space without reservations, but the overall utilization was less than anticipated. Peace Park saw greater utilization of its performance space, with 10 performance space permits issued and additional music events put on by the BID. In the past, the Madison Arts

Commission has provided direct stipends to musicians to perform on the street, which could be a model used in the future.

Programming and Activation Key Lessons

- Programming has costs, and additional private or public funding sources are needed if greater levels of activities are desired
- Music and entertainment events were generally successful
- Targeted social media advertising was successful in drawing crowds for specialty events

Hours of Closure

The hours of closure (after 3:00pm on weekdays, 10:00am on weekends) were established after meeting with local businesses to understand delivery patterns and considering activity patterns already in place on the street. Staff contacted and discussed the closure with representatives with USPS, FedEx and UPS (City staff attempted to contact Amazon but couldn't talk to a representative).

Some survey respondents indicated street closure periods were not always observed by vehicles, including delivery vehicles, private automobiles and some municipal vehicles. The hours of closure were in addition the existing lunch delivery prohibition, which created some confusion initially as drivers believed they could deliver any time before 3:00 pm on weekdays.

There is small parking lot behind a building in the 500 block of State Street which users were permitted to access even during closure hours. Some respondents reported seeing City of Madison vehicles with no apparent business on the street, and staff has heard reports of mutual aid vehicles using State Street after completing their calls. There was no dedicated enforcement of the closure times and compliance was hoped to be voluntary.

Staff did not hear complaints from businesses related to the closure in the summer months. As the school year resumed, Target reached out with concerns about weekend fresh food deliveries, which occur otherwise occur in the early afternoon during the week. Returning students brought increased demand for groceries, particularly on Sunday.

Hours of Closure Key Lessons

- Vehicular restrictions generally did not appear to have negative impacts on most deliveries.
- Compliance with vehicular restrictions was mixed and there was no consistent enforcement mechanism.
- If possible, closure hours should better align with the existing lunch hour prohibitions.

Other Topics

Bike and Pedestrian Conflicts

Both cyclists and pedestrians reported problems with cyclists and pedestrians. Pedestrians complained some cyclists were riding too fast through the Pedestrian Mall, while cyclist complained pedestrians often weren't paying attention and would wander into their path. To our knowledge no collisions occurred, but there were close calls between bikes and vehicles.

State Street is a key, low-stress route in the City's bike network with a direct, linking Capitol and the university. During the concept development phase, creating dedicated bike lanes was discussed but ultimately not included in the design. Staff concluded a bike lane would likely not be perceived by pedestrians crossing a street without traffic. Simultaneously, a bike lane would give cyclist the impression it was their dedicated space, possibly leading to higher speeds.

Most conflicts occurred around the evening commute, shortly after vehicle restrictions began, and during special events. Special events often barricaded the streets to ensure vehicles did not enter State Street and to encourage cyclists to walk bikes at times of high pedestrian volumes. Some cyclists would bike around the barricades and continue down State Street anyway, in conditions clearly not appropriate for cycling. Staff observed this several times, including during the April painting event.

Bike and Pedestrian Key Lessons:

- Bike and pedestrian conflicts are real, but staff continues to believe bike lanes are not an appropriate solution.
- New bike routes that act as special event detours should be established for when State Street is closed. Add "Walk Bikes" signage at street ends during special events.
- Consider signage or other visual clues to convey State Street is a shared space for pedestrians and cyclists. Consider modifying speed limit signage to remind cyclists it also applies to them.

Paratransit Access

Metro's Paratransit as well as licensed taxicabs (not rideshares) were permitted to drive on State Street during hours of closure to pick up or drop of those with mobility limitations. When special events fully closed the streets, Paratransit would generally use the closest available location on a cross street for access. Metro Paratransit provided 104 rides originating or terminating on the 400-600 blocks of State Street during the Pedestrian Mall Experiment. No problems were reported to Metro Paratransit about access.

Paratransit Access Key Lessons:

- The Pedestrian Mall did not interfere with Paratransit access.

- Loading zones on cross streets should be evaluated to ensure paratransit pick up and drop off spots are present during events that cause full street closures. These could also be used by delivery vehicles or
- Paratransit vehicles should display Metro Transit logos to discourage non-authorized vehicles from following them onto State Street.

Mall Concourse Maintenance Staffing

Throughout the summer, MCM staff took on a significant amount of work associated with the Pedestrian Mall Experiment. This was in addition to their regular work to keep the Mall Concourse clean, attractive and functioning. MCM work related to the Pedestrian Mall included but was not limited to:

- Placing and removing street furniture
- Repositioning street furniture after vehicle strikes
- Installing Flamingo sculptures and ensuring bolts are secure
- Watering planters and replacing plants after theft/vandalism
- Removing graffiti from benches
- Removing refuse in and around street furniture

MCM estimated 360 hours were spent related to the Pedestrian Mall Experiment. MCM only received a small amount of additional funds for the experiment, covering the overtime needed to water the plants in added street furniture.

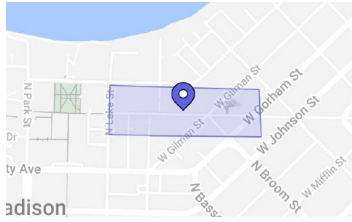
MCM Staffing Key Lessons

- Extra staff resources are needed for Pedestrian Mall maintenance. MCM can't cover this level of work without additional staff in the future.
- Greater attention should be paid to pedestrian mall elements to minimize work added to MCM's responsibilities.
- MCM does not have capacity to care for additional planters. Extra planters on the 400-600 blocks will result in other planters being removed.

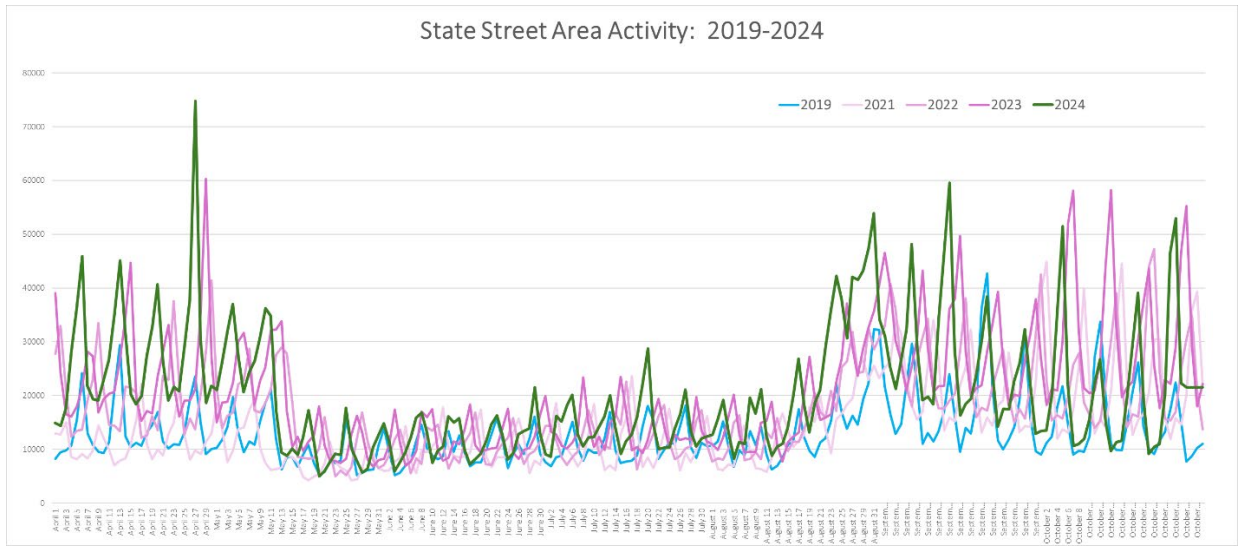
Outcomes from Closure

Activity Levels

The City partnered with the BID to access Placer.ai data. Placer utilizes anonymized mobile device location data to measure activity levels, travel patterns and estimate demographics. The BID created custom geofenced area that allowed activity measurements of the 400-600 blocks this summer as well as into the recent past. Overall, the Pedestrian Mall saw activity increases of 11% compared to 2023, and 27% compared to 2022. Compared to pre-pandemic levels, there were 63% more people on State Street.



	2024 activity vs. past							
	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	Total
2019	+107%	+63%	+21%	+32%	+78%	+45%	+48%	+63%
2021	+145%	+89%	+23%	+27%	+72%	+27%	-7%	+72%
2022	+36%	+12%	+17%	+16%	+46%	+11%	-8%	+27%
2023	+12%	-1%	+3%	+4%	+29%	-9%	-30%	+11%



June and July may be the best measure of the impact #FlockToState had on activity levels. Those months saw a 4% increase in activity. August data may be impacted by the opening of Oliv, a 386-unit student-oriented apartment building at State and Gorham. Frequent May rains may have dampened activity levels, resulting in the only month below past data. Badger Football scheduling and policy changes may have influenced activity levels in September and October, as gameday crowds appear lower than in years past.

Survey Results

Two surveys were created to understand public perceptions of the Pedestrian Mall Experiment. A user survey was created and posted to FlockToState.com which was available on the QR codes throughout the 400-600 blocks. Users had a generally favorable view of the experiment and indicated they were more likely to come to State Street as a result. Over 500 survey respondents completed the brief survey. 84% indicated they like or love the Pedestrian Mall experiment and 81% stated they would likely come to State Street more. Respondents said they most liked the comfortable feeling the experiment created by having fewer cars and more space for pedestrians. They frequently stated it felt calmer, less noisy and safer while being more active, vibrant and fun. Suggestions for improvement include expanding the hours and locations of areas which prohibit vehicles, discussion of bike/pedestrian conflicts. Several respondents mentioned a desire to fully block the street to traffic to address vehicles not following restrictions. Other comments included the deteriorating paint, homeless individuals, and adding more events. Many

respondents felt the experiment didn't go far enough, and more permeant infrastructure changes are needed to fully realize the benefits of the pedestrian mall.

A second survey targeted businesses and property owners. As of November 4th, only 10 responses were received. *(findings to be added in future drafts)*

Additional Recommendations

Beyond key takeaways previously discussed, the following recommendations should be considered if the pedestrian mall returns to the 400-600 block, or similar pedestrian blocks are created. Many of these are capital projects or system changes beyond the scope of a one-year experiment, but lessons learned from the experiment suggests these items should be considered for the future.

Retractable Bollards

Retractable Bollards could provide better access control 400-600 blocks of State Street, ensuring non-emergency vehicles don't enter State Street during periods of the pedestrian mall. Automated systems could be set to raise and lower them at appropriate times and there are models designed for cold weather climates that resist issues from ice or salt. Emergency access still must be considered, and access to the parking lot on the 500 block still must be provided. One set of retractable bollards at the end of each block would be sufficient to discourage vehicles by preventing through traffic, while providing a failsafe emergency access in the event of malfunction.

Raised Pedestrian Crossings

Raised crossings help control vehicular speed and improve visibility of pedestrians. When installed in midblock locations, they create a new accessible route for those with mobility limitations or using a wheelchair.

Consider adding a Fire Hydrant to the 400 block.

No fire hydrants are on the 400 block of State Street. While hoses can reach hydrants on cross streets, a new hydrant would add flexibility for fire trucks arriving on an active scene.

Consider making the 400-600 blocks of State Street one way

Certain areas of State Street are almost impassible in the early morning hours. Large delivery vehicles are often parked on both sides of the street, constraining the street for both other vehicles and bikes. Converting the street to one way and only allowing loading on one side would ensure there is more through space for bikes and vehicles. The density of delivery vehicles also was one of the causes of furniture strikes. In a one-way condition, it may be possible to reinstall furniture in the roadway on one side of the street.

Consider updating the State Street Vehicular Access Ordinance

During the concept development phase, Parking Utility staff discussed the need to update the State Street ordinance ([MGO 12.915](#)), which is largely reflects the 2001 amendment.

The ordinance controls vehicular traffic and established the lunchtime vehicle prohibition. If the Common Council acts to continue the pedestrian mall in future years, the ordinance should also be updated.

Consider lighting upgrades

Lighting improvements could enhance the character of the street in the evening hours. String lights could be installed over the terrace and sidewalk but need to remain out of the street to preserve the fire aerial apparatus zone. Many of the decorative rope lighting features on the pedestrian light poles are out and the manufacturer has since closed, requiring custom fabrication of replacements.