



## Pedestrian Advisory Committee

June 13, 2023

Mr. Mark Schwartz  
Arlington County Manager  
Via e-mail: [mschwartz@arlingtonva.us](mailto:mschwartz@arlingtonva.us)

Dear Mr. Schwartz:

RE: FOOD Study

The Pedestrian Advisory Committee (PAC) received a presentation on the FOOD (Future of Outdoor Dining) Study from Brett Wallace on October 12, 2022, and the BAC (Bicycle Advisory Committee) and PAC jointly received a presentation from him at our joint meeting on June 5, 2023. We are writing to you today to share the PAC concerns on the proposal currently before the County Board regarding outdoor restaurant seating coming out of the FOOD Study.

The PAC is fully supportive of the needs of restaurants to stay as economically viable as possible as they recover into a “new normal,” and the role that outdoor dining can play in activating our streetscapes. However, the PAC is concerned with the details of this proposal, particularly as they relate to outdoor cafés on public rights-of-way and as they relate to pedestrian access through areas with outdoor cafés.

Primarily, the current proposal essentially codifies a six-foot minimum pedestrian space across the entire County, with the only exceptions being for places with a site plan or use permit calling for a larger width. Current outdoor café guidelines call for the adherence to the requirements of the Master Transportation Plan and Sector Plans in determining the minimum width of outdoor cafes located in the public rights-of-way. The new proposal does not. We are extremely concerned that this will be a continuation of a “race to the bottom” where we continually encroach on the limited space that is available to pedestrians, and that any proposal that meets the minimum requirements of the proposed zoning ordinance will be approved, regardless of whether it is appropriate for the area or not. Therefore we encourage the zoning code to refer to the MTP and sector plans specifically.

Relatedly, we are disappointed that the proposal takes away only from pedestrian space as it looks at where to place outdoor cafés, and does nothing to use the areas outside the sidewalk to meet this demand. Why are we continuing to ban putting outdoor cafés in “parklets” or other spaces that were traditionally used for cars and insisting that pedestrians need to be the ones to give up their extremely limited space to accommodate outdoor dining? Many other cities have made it work with on-street seating areas that accommodate both the need for restaurants to expand outdoors and for pedestrians to enjoy the sidewalk.

Lastly, we remain concerned, as we do with many issues, about enforcement and how these actions will affect pedestrians with disabilities. Especially with clear zones widths limited to six feet, even slight shifts in furniture location (or a diner leaving their chair pushed out) can significantly impede the ability of pedestrians with disabilities to traverse through the area. We have seen, both pre-pandemic and with the TOSAs (Temporary Outdoor Seating Areas) that the County does not have the resources to effectively police these areas.

We appreciate that the County is operating under a deadline to implement a new post-pandemic regime for outdoor dining. But this proposal does not seem to appropriately balance the needs of all street users in crafting a solution. If it cannot be appropriately modified in the current time frame,<sup>1</sup> we would encourage you to postpone its adoption, or provide for immediate review and revision after adoption.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Gallather, Chair, Pedestrian Advisory Committee

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<sup>1</sup> The end of this process seems very rushed. Less than one week prior to the request to advertise, we cannot locate a copy of the proposed County Code language on Encroachment, for example.