

In June 2020, the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) launched the [Shared Streets and Spaces Grant Program](#) to assist municipalities in meeting their individual needs for safe outdoor recreation, commerce, community activities, and mobility in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The grant provides technical and funding assistance to help Massachusetts cities and towns conceive, design, and implement tactical changes to curbs, streets and parking areas in support of public health, safe mobility, and renewed commerce. Some municipalities have also incorporated creative elements to further enhance their new spaces; the case study below highlights one such creative activation. [Click here](#) for more case studies and examples.



Image Credit: Purchase St Parket, James McKeag

Fall River, MA

Creative partnerships for economic development

KEY FEATURES

Custom-made, architect-designed parklet for outdoor dining.

Comprehensive branding and wayfinding to knit together economic revitalization efforts.

GOALS

Help businesses respond to the COVID-19 crisis and public health protocols by creating space for outdoor dining.

Create a highly visible and attractive proof-of-concept project to spur development of more outdoor dining areas and parklets.

Develop a pilot process and regulatory framework for the city and community partners to adapt to new sites.

Engage local businesses and residents in the project planning process.

Building on efforts to spur economic development in downtown Fall River through MassDevelopment's [Transformative Development Initiative \(TDI\)](#), community advocates partnered with local designers and arts organizations to activate the area during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Established in 2019 through MassDevelopment's Transformative Development Initiative, the Fall River TDI District aims to connect the city's central business core with other neighborhoods and nodes of activity. TDI Fellow Jim McKeag, a full-time MassDevelopment employee specializing in urban and economic development, works within a cross-sector TDI Partnership (with representation from the city and local businesses and nonprofits) to support and lead community-based projects by connecting people, identifying resources, and empowering Fall River residents. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, McKeag worked with a host of local organizations, students, small businesses, and other constituents. The team built on the existing efforts to launch a downtown outdoor dining and wayfinding program to further support the Fall River community.

PROCESS

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the TDI Partnership had worked with students enrolled in Professor Emily Vogler's landscape architecture course at the Rhode Island School of Design and YEAH! Corps (Youth Experiencing Artistic Hope), a local creative youth development nonprofit, to develop creative strategies to assist small businesses in the TDI District. As the pandemic took hold, these partners and collaborators saw that developing outdoor dining facilities would be critical for the survival of downtown businesses. These collaborators included not just Vogler, YEAH! and McKeag, but additional partners including Patti Rego of We Love Fall River, Tatiana Gómez Gaggero and José Ato Menéndez of Counterpoint, and Tyler Inman of Smokestack Studios.



Image Credit: Thyme Blossom

In partnership with local organizations and municipal officials, McKeag and Fall River constituents combined a portion of the funds awarded through a Shared Streets and Spaces grant awarded with funds provided by the Solomon Foundation to create facilities for outdoor dining and strengthen the district's identity through a creative wayfinding and branding program, Viva Fall River. Inspired in part by LA Más, a Los Angeles-based urban design nonprofit that designs and builds initiatives that promote neighborhood resilience and elevate the agency of working-class communities of color, Viva Fall River aimed to support the Fall River downtown district using creative wayfinding and small-business support programs to spur economic development.

Initially, the team planned to install parklets at several locations but ended up scaling back the project after initial feedback from MassDOT. After finalizing several sites with the design team, only one site was ultimately approved to move forward. Although it took the team several months to secure the necessary approvals, once approved the parklet came together quickly. The final phase of the project took only two weeks, from finalizing the design to ordering materials, installing the required concrete barriers, and fabricating and installing the components.

Building on a concept developed by the design team, local partners built and installed the parklet on Purchase Street, outside restaurant Thyme Blossom and an adjoining business, The Meat Shop. The group also worked with the city to secure outdoor heaters that were distributed to over 20 restaurants.

In addition to the parklet project, the Viva Fall River initiative included custom sandwich board signage designed by YEAH! Corps students and fabricated by a local firm, Smokestack Studios; a website with an interactive map and business directory; and a mural at the Viva Fall River Pop-Up shop.



Image Credit: Purchase St Parklet, James McKeag



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TIMELINE

MAY 2020

Design team began conversations with the city's grant writer.

MAY-JUNE 2020

Design and project development

SEPTEMBER 2020

Project approved.

FUNDING SOURCES

Grant Funds: The City of Fall River received **\$35,036** from Shared Streets and Spaces. Of this, \$20,244 was spent in 2020, with the remainder returned to the city. Additionally, the Solomon Foundation awarded **\$10,000** to support the project. Of this, \$5,645 was spent in 2020, with the remainder to be used for outdoor dining in 2021.

Direct Costs:

Parklet Design, Materials and Fabrication:

\$16,306.76

Project Coordination: **\$2,000**

Administration: **\$1,811**

PARTNERS

Tatiana Gomez, Counterform Community Design and Printing Studio (initial parklet design concept, mural)

Jim McKeag, TDI Fellow (final parklet design concept, permitting, fabrication, and business relations)

José Menendez, Counterform Community Design and Printing Studio (initial parklet design concept, project branding)

Patti Rego, Viva Fall River (project branding, website development)

Tyler Inman, Smokestack Studios (parklet component design, fabrication)

South Main Small Business Initiative/Bristol County Chamber Foundation (business relations)

Emily Vogler, Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture at the Rhode Island School of Design and the Principal of Commonplace Landscape Studio (initial parklet design concept)

YEAH! Corps (Youth Experiencing Artistic Hope) (mural design and execution)

TIPS FOR SUCCESS AND LESSONS LEARNED

ADVICE FOR OTHER MUNICIPALITIES:

Start small. Although the team wanted to help as many restaurants as possible, many lacked the capacity to execute outdoor dining due to other challenges facing their businesses. The team's ambition may have clouded their sense of what was feasible given the timeframe, approval processes, and available funding.

Be mindful of the regulatory system. Due to the number of sites originally proposed, the full project concept initially overwhelmed the regulatory system, which had no provision for permitting dining facilities situated in a public right of way or that required multiple licenses. For municipalities that lack a formal permitting process for parklets and/or outdoor dining, begin with one or two sites and build from there.

Be responsive. Focusing on one project at a time can help ensure that project facilitators are attuned to the needs of individual businesses, as well as to the unique physical conditions and permitting requirements of each site.

FUTURE VISION AND PROJECTS

The project has helped formalize Fall River's management of outdoor dining facilities. In 2021, the city established an outdoor dining season from April 1 – November 1, waived the permit fee, and is looking to expand outdoor dining in public spaces. The city plans to use \$45,000 from a TDI Challenge Grant to create an online permitting portal and streamlined approval process, including for outdoor dining. Part of the grant will also be used to launch a citywide outdoor dining fund. Through this program, eligible restaurants can receive a \$2,000 grant to ease the costs associated with outdoor dining.



REFERENCE LINKS:

<https://wbsm.com/fall-river-offers-free-outdoor-space-heaters-to-restaurants/>

<https://fallriverreporter.com/fall-river-hoping-to-keep-city-restaurants-going-this-winter-with-some-warmth/>

<https://fallriverreporter.com/project-focused-on-multi-faceted-approach-to-improving-downtown-fall-river/>

OUR TAKEAWAYS:

Relationships matter. The parklet and other activations funded through the Shared Streets and Spaces grant built on existing relationships developed through TDI efforts. The project also strengthened working relationships among the design team and community partners—a key factor for success.

Build on successes. By providing a successful proof of concept, the project helped the community recognize the value of outdoor dining and spur demand for further parklets, in addition to inspiring the city to create new permitting processes for outdoor dining facilities.

Embrace local partners. In addition to supporting local restaurants, the project provided opportunities for local artists, designers, arts nonprofits, and creative businesses in a time of need and shone a spotlight on the wealth of creative talent in Fall River and neighboring communities.



Image Credit: Thyme Blossom