

FROM PROTOTYPE TO PROGRAM

Philadelphia Is Taking Meaningful Steps Toward a Successful Outdoor Dining Program

After years of discussion, false starts, regulatory changes, and uncertainty surrounding outdoor dining in Philadelphia, it is gratifying to see something tangible. The City's installation of streetery prototypes at Love Park is a meaningful milestone and an opportunity for the public to engage directly with an idea that could strengthen commercial corridors citywide.

We are encouraged by both the design of these prototypes and what their appearance along JFK Boulevard represents. By putting ideas on the ground and inviting public feedback, the City has moved the conversation beyond plans and policy discussions into real-world evaluation.

Just as importantly, these installations signal that the City remains committed to outdoor dining as a permanent component of Philadelphia's fabric. The value of outdoor seating extends beyond the restaurants that benefit directly. Vibrant sidewalks, active storefronts, and well-used public spaces contribute to the energy and character of great urban neighborhoods.

The City's decision to develop standardized, pre-approved streetery options that restaurants can implement with confidence is a significant breakthrough. As the City has explained, the goal is to provide designs that satisfy approval requirements and can be adopted more affordably and efficiently by business owners.

For the past several years, Philadelphia has relied on restaurant owners to navigate the design, permitting, and construction process themselves. That was never a formula for widespread adoption. Standardized options are best practice. They reduce uncertainty, lower costs, streamline approvals, and remove barriers that discourage participation. Restaurateurs should not have to become experts in site planning and permitting simply to create outdoor seating for their customers.

At the same time, these prototypes should be viewed as the beginning of a successful program rather than its final form. As the City refines the initiative, we encourage additional options and flexibility. Philadelphia's diverse neighborhoods will benefit from approved designs that respond to a variety of contexts and business needs.

One area that deserves further exploration is size. While the prototypes effectively demonstrate material choices and construction approaches, both are roughly twenty feet in length. For many restaurants, that may not fully illustrate a streetery's economic potential. A forty-foot layout may provide a more realistic demonstration of how outdoor dining can operate successfully while creating a stronger streetscape presence. Features such as optional integrated planting (lighting, as well), separate platform components, and other modifications will increase visual appeal, functionality, and accessibility as the program evolves.

Of the two concepts currently on display, the slatted design may prove the more widely adopted. It feels at home in many Philadelphia neighborhoods, and its straightforward construction offers a promising balance of practicality, appearance, maintainability, and cost.

The slatted design may also age more gracefully. Wear, weathering, minor damage, and day-to-day use are often less visible on textured surfaces than on large uninterrupted panels. Integrated planting, if properly maintained, can soften the overall appearance and help the structure feel like an extension of the public realm rather than temporary infrastructure.

The more solid, molded concept offers a different set of possibilities. Its bold red color is striking and unapologetically urban. In a city where streetscapes can often feel dominated by concrete, asphalt, and muted tones, the introduction of strong color is a welcome reminder that public spaces can be functional and joyful at the same time.

The City should not be afraid to think boldly about color. A single signature color could create a recognizable citywide identity, while a coordinated palette could provide flexibility and maintain visual consistency. The goal should be a recognizable design language that feels distinctly Philadelphian wherever it is installed.

Thoughtful use of color also presents an opportunity to encourage creativity without sacrificing quality. Both designs could accommodate accent colors, artistic treatments, or neighborhood-specific variations without losing their character. What we should avoid, however, is allowing these structures to become oversized advertising platforms. The value of a streetery lies in its contribution to the public environment, and Philadelphia's sidewalks deserve better than a future lined with corporate logos masquerading as placemaking.

Durability should remain central to the City's evaluation process as well. Large uninterrupted surfaces are more susceptible to stickers, graffiti, and vandalism. While no design is immune, the slatted concept may prove more resilient from both a maintenance and appearance perspective. Long-term performance should carry as much weight as initial aesthetics when determining which designs move forward.

Ultimately, Philadelphia is not simply choosing between two structures. It is establishing the design language for what will hopefully become a significant addition to the city's public realm. To take the program to the next level, the City should expand approved options, explore larger configurations, increase flexibility, and continue refining the details.

We are no longer debating whether outdoor dining belongs on our streets. We are discussing how to make it work better.

That is real progress. And it deserves both recognition and continued ambition.

The DAG Steering Committee



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