

## Laguna Beach approves recommendations to implement economic recovery and business development plan



Lower Forest Avenue will be closing this summer after a unanimous vote to put into action a pilot program for a space where residents can eat and interact safely while allowing restaurants available space to operate at sustainable levels.

The Laguna Beach City Council voted to direct City Manager John Pietig to enter a contract with Coachella organizers Choura Events not exceeding \$145,703 to implement “Promenade on Forest,” an outdoor dining and entertainment program, by June 15. It also approved the temporary use permit and temporary coastal development permit to do so.

Both permits are subject to conditions outlined in a resolution approved as a part of Tuesday’s motions. Other approvals include the waiving of temporary use permit fees and the delegation of authority to Community Development Director Marc Weiner to approve those permits for outdoor dining, displays and minor deviations on sign and banner standards through Sept. 7.

The conversion of Ocean Avenue to a one-way street will also be delayed until fall.

The presentation given by staff on Tuesday said the goal of Promenade on Forest was to create a safe environment for pedestrians for the summer, with the intention of local businesses being able to expand their seating and merchandise displays into the street and to providing opportunities for artists. The project was included as part of [an economic recovery and business development plan](#), approved by the City Council at its May 12 meeting.

The concept plan was designed by city staff, Choura Events and SWA Group, a local landscape architecture and urban design firm that designed the [Downtown Action Plan](#).

Plans call for Promenade on Forest to be limited to the one-way section of Forest Avenue between Coast Highway and Glenneyre Street. It will operate between 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. It also includes opportunities for dining decks, retail display decks and a performance art stage along with additional landscaping, temporary art installations.

Maintenance staff will also be on-site to disinfect the area.

Patrons will be able to purchase meals from any restaurant in the area to eat at the Promenade. Outside alcohol will not be permitted but can be purchased on-site

The conversion of Forest Avenue to Promenade on Forest will lead to the loss of 46 parking spaces, but city staff said that parking demand downtown will decrease this summer due to cancellation of the Festival of Arts and Pageant of the Masters and additional parking at the Village Entrance and the bus depot on Ocean Avenue.

Assistant City Manager Shohreh Dupuis said that the city would also hire on-site, private security guards every day during operating hours to monitor physical distancing and report any noncompliance or crimes to the Laguna Beach Police Department. Officers will monitor the area periodically.

Promenade on Forest is estimated to cost \$248,703.

Dozens of people spoke to both sides of the argument during public comment. Many were in support of the plan to close Forest Avenue, but others pointed to issues of parking, restrooms and city spending.

Councilwoman Toni Iseman said she was concerned about crowd capacities and physical distancing, adding that the tables and chairs were moveable.

“This would not be considered a success unless the number of people on Forest Avenue today were not multiplied by a factor of 10. That’s how many it would take to get that sense of vitality that we’re looking for,” Iseman said. “I think it’s a toughie. I don’t know how we’re going to do it, but I think we have to address that if this weren’t the season of the virus, this is a great thing.”

“But, we keep talking about the virus and yet we’re doing something that’s a little risky,” Iseman said.

Councilman Peter Blake protested the inclusion of public comment on whether to go ahead with the program, arguing that public comment had already been received at the May 12 meeting and that the plan had already been approved. Blake said Tuesday’s discussion should focus on the permits and resolution allowing for Promenade on Forest to occur.