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# **Saving Victorian businesses with placemaking**

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## 1. Creating resilient and people-friendly streets

As Victoria's active COVID-19 cases begins to fall, there's light at the end of the lockdown tunnel. Now it's time to turn our attention on how we make Victoria's new normal, a better, more resilient and healthier normal.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on our local communities. With large numbers of people required to work and school from home, and restrictions on how far and how often we can leave our homes, the liveability of our neighbourhoods and long-term viability of local businesses has never been more important. It has reinforced the value of open spaces, vibrant main streets and active transport links.

Victorians want 'people-friendly' spaces where they can get active, socialise and support local businesses, all while practicing appropriate physical distancing. The COVID-19 pandemic has given governments a unique opportunity to build resilient neighbourhoods that people want to live, work and play in.

In places around the world (and even locally), governments have achieved this through parklets or urban placemaking which involves converting on-street car parking into visually distinct spaces for people with seating, street furniture or planters. Served best outside businesses that rely on walk-up customers, it's a simple, adaptable and inexpensive way to experiment with providing new value and meaning to public spaces.

To help make these new, flexible spaces part of our better normal, both the Andrews Government and councils have an important role to play. In decentralising employment and supporting local economies, the state government should make stimulus funding for short-term urban placemaking directly available to eager local businesses. To support implementation, local governments should provide a streamlined, rapid permit process along with rent free spaces.

With government funding and local council backing, Bicycle Network envisions an urban placemaking program that creates vibrant streets with thriving businesses where people can interact in a way the minimises the risk of third wave infections.

**Bicycle Network is asking the state government to invest \$15 million to deliver 1,000 parklets, retail, service or hospitality spaces over three-months.**

Bicycle Network has the skills, capacity and passion to see this program succeed and looks forward to discussing it more with you.

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## 2. Key benefits summary

Bicycle Network's proposed parklet program (converting on-street car parking into flexible spaces for services, restaurants, cafes and retail) is a locally focussed approach that will help save, support and create jobs that matter to Victorians.

For a \$15 million investment, the government can expect to reap the following benefits:

- help individual businesses generate up to \$71,359 in much needed income by creating and opening additional space for customers to shop, dine, etc with the potential to inject more than \$71.3 million into the economy.
- see a 381 per cent return on investment with the economic benefits shared across three key sectors – local businesses, the events and arts industry
- decentralise employment, protect and stimulate local job opportunities
- safeguard the physical health and mental wellbeing of the community
- reduce the risk and protect against future COVID-19 outbreaks
- achieve consistency with the state government's 20-minute neighbourhood policy by focusing on small scale approaches to revitalising suburban centres
- facilitate a community-oriented public open space that supports relaxation, social interaction and engagement with main streets.



Image 1: Angove Street Parklet, North Perth



Image 2: Grandview Hotel, Brunswick West



### 3. More public spaces central to lockdown recovery

While lockdown restrictions have provided the government with a pragmatic solution to stopping the spread of COVID-19, the strategy carries several social and economic considerations.

Firstly, we must consider the social and mental health impacts of prolonged isolation. Evidence suggests that social interactions, even as small as a brief community exchange, are extremely important for an individual's wellbeing [1][2]. The Victorian government's Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2015-2019 [3] also recognises how social aspects influence our collective mental health, and that social connection is key to quality of life.

Public spaces are essential for social cohesion [4] and the wellbeing of the community [5]. Significant increases in recreational activity such as bike riding and walking during lockdown measures has shown how much Victorians rely on open, public spaces [6]. As Victorians re-enter their communities, urban interventions that allow for social cohesion will be critical for restoring our physical health and mental wellbeing.

Secondly, we must consider the challenges now facing the retail and hospitality sectors. For traders, the challenge is more than recovering the income lost during lockdown. They must continually adapt their business models to fit government's safety guidelines and rebuild trust with customers [7].

Revitalising our shopping behaviour is integral to bringing people out of their homes into our public spaces safely and enhancing the 'liveability' of our neighbourhoods. Local commerce is the lifeblood of communities. As online retail trade continues to dominate over physical trade [8], Victoria's retail and hospitality districts, which form a vibrant component of the community, are at risk of not fully recovering from the shopping behaviour changes associated with lockdown life.

To rebuild our economy and address social wellbeing in a post-lockdown Victoria, we require adaptable changes to the urban landscape that can attract the community back into our main streets, while considering space limitations and physical distancing. There is increased concern that public spaces are already too crowded under the current guidelines [9].

Enhancing public space must be more than improvement of what is already allocated. We must expand our community space to optimize social cohesion, minimize crowding and, most importantly, to mitigate health risks.



## 4. We need flexible, customizable spaces that meet the needs of business, council and community

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, parklets and similar pop-up public spaces have provided an exciting opportunity to convert urban space and single-use car parking for community use. These examples of 'tactical urbanism' [10] allow councils to forgo large investments into urban transformation projects and, instead, repurpose sections of existing streetscape.

The temporary nature of parklets means that 'red tape' is minimized and installation is fast. For businesses, it's a way to beautify their block and attract more foot traffic. For governments, it is a minor investment to create innovative new public spaces that can change the shape of our cities. For communities, it adds new value to public spaces, allows for safe social interactions and can lead to more long-term permanent 'people-friendly' streetscapes.

The most successful parklet programs and initiatives share similar characteristics in their environment and design:

- appropriately service retail and hospitality businesses in areas of high foot traffic
- set up in areas where there's a lack of appropriate public space
- are visually distinct through adaptable street furniture, planter boxes and borders
- take up the space of one or two on-street car parks
- implemented on low speed roads
- avoid clearways, major thoroughfares and don't block disability access
- contribute to an atmosphere of social cohesion

A parklet or urban placemaking initiative that is designed and implemented with transparency and consideration of the local context is also more likely to offer enormous benefit for community wellbeing.

Many Australian councils are currently implementing successful parklet programs, with more to come out of the NSW Government COVID-19 grants program, *Streets as Shared Spaces* demonstrating strong business and government support (see attached case studies). A recent parklet study in Perth found a 20-35 per cent increase in local footfall, and 89 per cent community support.

However, these programs remain limited in Victoria due to government funding, business costs, complicated permitting processes and local government bureaucracy.

With investment, an opportunity exists for the state government to cut the red tape and take the financial burden of urban placemaking off small businesses, many of which are already struggling to stay afloat.

Whilst these spaces will primarily benefit the businesses that support them, it's clear the benefits are widespread. More room for cafes, restaurants and retail spaces will encourage people to return to their main streets post lockdown and directly result in more money flowing into local economies.



## 5. Invest in a parklet program and stimulate local businesses

Bicycle Network is calling on the Andrews' Government to fund an urban placemaking program where on-street car parking spaces are converted into 'parklets' for businesses to service customers safely as we follow the government's staged roadmap to COVID-normal.

### Recommendation:

**Invest \$15 million to deliver 1,000 parklets, retail or hospitality spaces across Victoria in the next three months with a potential 381 per cent return on investment.**

We've done the maths – looked at the equipment hire, implementation and customer turnover. For a relatively small investment of \$15 million, the government can help individual businesses generate up to \$71,359 in much needed income, injecting more than \$71.3m into the economy.

Funding should go directly to eager traders (cafes, retail spaces, hairdressers, personal trainers or any other businesses who are limited by space restrictions) who meet certain urban placemaking criteria. This ensures that parklet interventions bypass bureaucracy and delivery can be fast-tracked. To support implementation, local governments should provide a streamlined, rapid permit process along with rent free spaces.

State government funding for a parklet program should cover the cost of:

- Operational planning and creative design
- Street furniture, seating and planter boxes, bike parking hire
- Labour and delivery
- Compensation to council for lost parking revenue

Bicycle Network's proposed parklet program is a locally focussed approach that will help save, support and create jobs that matter to Victorians. The initiative supports the timelines outlined in Victoria's road map and is also consistent with the state government's 20-minute neighbourhood policy by focusing on small scale approaches to revitalising suburban centres.

It offers a potential 381 per cent return on investment with the economic benefits shared across three key sectors – local business, events and arts industry. It supports increased business confidence, community confidence and quick delivery of urban renewal projects.

The necessary equipment can be easily sourced from event suppliers, many who have been financially crippled by a cancelled events season. A parklet program can prop up the events industry by putting to use the equipment that would otherwise be sitting stagnant in warehouses due to a season of cancelled summer events.

In making it more attractive for customers to access retail or hospitality businesses, the state government can save our main streets from becoming business wastelands and putting local businesses at the centre of our economic recovery.



With more than 40 years' experience running mass participation events and behaviour change programs, Bicycle Network has the available team, operational capabilities, adaptability and passion to work with the state government to lead and coordinate the implementation of this proposal.

Local business owners are crying out for help, and this program gives the state government an immediate, flexible and cost-effective way to get us all out of this crisis.

## 6. Case studies: Successful parklets and tactical urbanism programs in Australia

### 5.1 Angove Street Parklet, North Perth



- Community support prior to planning
- Aesthetically pleasing design, welcoming to all (not just patrons of the café)
- Well located – away from busier roads, but still high foot traffic

### 5.2 Moreland Parklet Program – Small Block Café Brunswick; Grandview Hotel, Brunswick West

#### *Grandview Hotel, Brunswick West*



- Simple design that increases the pub's service area
- Removes patrons off the footpath
- Well located on local roads, not obstructing clearways or high road traffic areas



- Achieved through Moreland's parklet program
- Strong council support

### *Hotel Lincoln, Carlton*



- Introduced in response to first round of lockdown measures – according to the publican, this intervention allowed them to remain open despite the patron limits

### **5.3 Greville St, Prahran**



- Temporary intervention that resulted in permanently widened footpaths
- Grass roots movement raised the issue, local Council then trialed the intervention temporarily – a test run

## 5.4 Domain Road pop up park



*Please note: All images taken prior to coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak.*

- Trial initiative by Metro Tunnel Creative program – roughly the size of five on-street car parks
- Created extra café seating and space for people to socialise
- Strong community support - over [66% of respondents](#) wanted to see the park extended beyond the 5-month trial
- Strong community engagement

## 5.5 NSW Streets as Shared Spaces Grants

- The NSW Government announced a list of urban and regional streets due for temporary transformations as part of their \$15 million *Streets as Shared Spaces* program.
- Launched in 2020, the program awards grants to councils for temporary activation projects that support the community during COVID-19 and test ideas for more permanent improvements to local streets, paths and public spaces.
- The program was designed to:
  - support essential workers to travel to work, and people working from home
  - contribute to NSW economic recovery in our local centres by creating vibrant streets and additional safe space to support local business
  - activate high streets to create better quality public space
  - support physical distancing requirements and encourage safe social connection
  - support the well-being of local communities and their ability to exercise
  - attract people back into public spaces in a safe way, when appropriate to do so
- It involved the delegation of some of Transport for NSW powers to local councils to enable fast track approvals that would normally require state level approval

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