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Historic Gaslamp Quarter Bets on Return of the Car-Free Pedestrian Mall

San Diego Business Leaders Bet Today's Lifestyle May Work for Design That Sputtered Out in 1970s



Plans are in the works to turn a portion of the popular Gaslamp Quarter in downtown San Diego into a pedestrian-only zone. (City of San Diego)

San Diego's historic and iconic commercial Gaslamp Quarter, a popular destination for tourists from across the country, is looking to boost its future by looking to its past with a bold step for driver-centric California: eliminating cars.

It would join a host of U.S. cities large and small that have banned vehicles from downtown streets, in hopes of making their urban cores more welcoming and relaxing for locals and visitors, with benefits for commercial tenants. Local business and government leaders are considering plans that would turn part of the [downtown Gaslamp Quarter](#) commercial district into a pedestrian-friendly area, emulating cities such as New Orleans, San Francisco and Santa Monica, California, that have had success in bringing new commercial and social life to urban hubs.

Officials with the Gaslamp Quarter Association, the non-profit business improvement district overseeing the 16-block district of vintage buildings running from Fourth Avenue east to Sixth Avenue, said it hired consultants to devise concepts for a potential public promenade to traffic from a portion of Fifth Avenue in the historic area. It marks a national shift back toward downtown pedestrian promenades, after the trend in the 1970s sputtered out. Today it's prompted by tighter emission standards and a less car-oriented lifestyle in the era of rideshare services such as Uber and cars rented by the hour from Zipcar and other providers.

"Urban plazas are major economic drivers and will be the centerpiece of future development downtown," Michael Trimble, executive director of the Gaslamp Quarter Association, said in a statement outlining early planning for what would be called Gaslamp Promenade.

Trimble said preliminary concepts call for Fifth Avenue to be recrafted into eight "distinctive plazas" running from L Street

north to Broadway, in a bid to build more of a community feel for social connections with open spaces not interrupted by traffic. For San Diego, the outside venues would let tourists spend more time enjoying a key reason they visit the area: the warm weather.



Gaslamp Promenade would include new social and community event spaces.
(Gaslamp Quarter Association)

The business improvement district is working with architectural firm Carrier Johnson + Culture and consulting firm Kimley Horn on planning, and it plans to cooperate with the business advocacy group San Diego Downtown Partnership and the city of San Diego to move the promenade project forward in coming months.

Timetables and cost estimates have not been released. City and business officials are looking to emulate the benefits of other cities that have successfully transformed busy streets into more walkable, social commercial districts in urban hubs. Such traffic-

free pedestrian streets have been common for more than a century in many European cities.

In many larger U.S. cities, sustainability and safety – for pedestrians and bicyclists – are increasingly prevalent reasons for the banishing of vehicles, though the upshots often include more relaxing and social business districts where people want to spend more time.

The concept generally works best for small sections of roads or certain neighborhoods of large cities, as the concept can encounter legal challenges from businesses concerned about lost drive-in traffic and parking, and frustration among residents created by construction and the re-routing of traffic through city centers.

Some cities over the decades have decided to abandon pedestrian-only zones and return them to their earlier status as car-accessible venues, when it was found pedestrian traffic alone was not enough to sustain businesses. This happened previously in some neighborhoods of Philadelphia and Chicago, and more recently in Fresno, California, which is currently redeveloping a failed pedestrian-only mall on its Fulton Street thoroughfare into a car-accessible entertainment district with enhanced nightlife.

Car-Free Future

Between 1959 and 1979, more than 200 American cities created pedestrian-only outdoor malls in their urban centers, largely as a

way to compete with the features of indoor suburban shopping malls, according to a 2010 report prepared by urban planner Jessica Schmidt for the Institute of Transportation Engineers.

Several of those pedestrian-only malls reverted back to vehicle access over the years after failing to find the right balance of foot traffic and business revenue, including hubs in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and Poughkeepsie, New York. Raleigh, North Carolina, decided in 2003 to reopen Fayetteville Street to cars after closing it off in 1977, though the reopening also came with new pedestrian spaces allowing people and cars to co-exist, Schmidt noted.

But in today's climate, increased emphasis particularly by younger urban residents on sustainable modes of transportation, combined with rising societal awareness about the impacts of climate change and moves by California and other states to curb polluting emissions, are putting vehicle-free planning back in the spotlight.

Last month, San Francisco approved a \$600 million plan to make a two-mile stretch of Market Street, among the city's busiest thoroughfares, accessible only to pedestrians and bicyclists, though streetcars and taxis will be permitted.

In the same month, New York City decided to make a one-mile stretch of 14th Street accessible only to buses as it installs new pedestrian plazas and considers doing the same with other busy streets. Portions of New York's tourist-friendly Times Square have been vehicle-free for several years.

Local business leaders said downtown San Diego already has a smaller version of a car-free street conversion now paying dividends as a revived social space: Piazza della Famiglia, which opened in March last year in [Little Italy](#). Developed by H.G. Fenton as part of a larger mixed-use apartment project, with events programmed with that enclave's business improvement district, Little Italy Association of San Diego, the 10,000-square-foot European-style plaza includes a fountain, umbrella-covered tables and chairs encouraging socializing and open-air dining.

"It's made a pretty big difference in Little Italy, and that's just one block," said David Maxwell, vice president in the San Diego office of brokerage Colliers International who handles urban retail transactions.

Maxwell said a car-free venue in the Gaslamp Quarter could give the enclave several elements it has long sought, including outdoor dining options and more social spaces for relaxing and holding community events geared to the neighborhood.

"That's something that should be good for stores, restaurants and these other kinds of tenants," Maxwell said. He added a revived promenade could also help make the Gaslamp better connected to nearby areas like [Horton Plaza](#), where other developers are seeking to convert a failed former retail mall into creative offices, and which for several years has been deemed cut off from surrounding areas like the Gaslamp Quarter.

The Gaslamp Quarter, which is registered as a historical district and contains more than 90 commercial and residential buildings dating back a century or more, generally extends from Broadway in the north to Harbor Drive to the south, putting it directly across the street from San Diego Convention Center.

A redevelopment of the Gaslamp Quarter in the early 1980s, after several years of decline, is widely credited with sparking a much larger downtown renaissance that led to development of the convention center, several large hotels, baseball's Petco Park stadium and numerous other projects now sprouting in the next-door East Village.

The Gaslamp Quarter today has several dining and entertainment venues popular with visitors and locals, most recently including a new [Theatre Box luxury movie theater](#) and adjacent Sugar Factory restaurant. But for several years officials have sought to bring the area more public social spaces that could help create a sense of place and community, especially with downtown's residential population on the rise.

Gary London, senior principal with real estate consulting firm London Moeder Advisors in San Diego, said today's wide use of ride-sharing technologies, and the fact that more people are living downtown and walking places – thus requiring less parking space – make cars less vital to the busy Gaslamp neighborhood than they once were.

He said extending pedestrian-only spaces has proven crucial to urban renewal in many U.S. cities, with the most successful examples including New Orleans' Bourbon Street and Santa Monica's Third Street Promenade, which has been a centerpiece to the growth of downtown even as it now is [undergoing plans by the city for an overhaul](#) in response to recent declines in commercial space usage and foot traffic.

London said such promenades serve to give locals and visitors a better sense of a neighborhood's uniqueness, while also encouraging more socializing and, over time, higher spending of time and money in the neighborhood. The right mix of public space, events and entertainment can also help minimize commercial vacancies, which helps keep locals coming back to otherwise familiar venues, and avoid the emergence of "dead zones" that might otherwise surface within and between established neighborhoods.

"The Santa Monica promenade shows that these venues can be very popular, but they also need to evolve," London said.