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#### **Title**

Improving Access to Outdoor Dining Opportunities: Analyzing the Constraints of LA Al Fresco

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#### **Photo Credit**

Courtesy of Severin Martinez



# **Key Takeaways**

- Sidewalks in Los Angeles's commercial districts vary widely in width ranging from less than 5 feet to more than 10 feet. Downtown Los Angeles, Westwood, Cheviot Hills, and Studio City have some of the widest sidewalks on average and neighborhoods across South Los Angeles have some of the narrowest sidewalks.
- Controlling for income, most neighborhoods with majority people of color have narrower commercial sidewalks than white-majority neighborhoods.
- Narrow sidewalks are a key constraint limiting business participation in LA Al Fresco Sidewalk Dining. While more businesses are able to participate under the city's relaxed pedestrian clearance requirements, the narrower space may lead to more conflicts between sidewalk dining and ADA access.
- More than half of the city's sidewalk dining applications are concentrated in 11 neighborhoods, located mainly in higher-income, white-majority neighborhoods.
- High speed limits, combined with narrow sidewalks in commercial corridors, constrain the ability for businesses to participate in LA Al Fresco Curbside Dining, especially in the neighborhoods across the San Fernando Valley and South Los Angeles.

# **Improving Access to Outdoor Dining** Opportunities: Analyzing Constraints of LA Al Fresco

The COVID-19 pandemic imposed wide-reaching adverse health effects. Businesses in Los Angeles and elsewhere struggled to navigate the ever-changing landscape of stay-at-home orders, capacity restrictions, and temporary shutdowns that ebbed and flowed starting in March 2020.

The restaurant industry was particularly hard hit as indoor-dining restrictions immediately forced dining establishments to pivot to take-out or delivery-based options. According to the California Restaurant Association, one in three restaurants closed statewide during the pandemic.

Using their emergency regulatory powers, in May 2020, the City of Los Angeles enacted an outdoor dining program — LA Al Fresco. Under this program, restaurants could quickly pivot to serve patrons outdoors on sidewalks, parking lots, and on portions of street rights of way. The city pledged to expedite the approval of applications and waived all costs to apply. Additionally, the program proposed directing 55% of program resources to "Black, Indigenous, people of color businesses" or in neighborhoods that experienced disproportionate job loss from the pandemic. Interested businesses completed a short, online application, describing their business type and location, sidewalk encroachment (e.g., tables, chairs, etc.), and the size and extent of the proposed outdoor dining area.

LA Al Fresco offered four types of outdoor dining opportunities, each of which applied to different outdoor areas:

- **Sidewalk dining**: spaces directly in front of or adjacent to restaurants.
- **Outdoor private dining**: repurposed parking lots or other outdoor private spaces.
- **Curbside dining**: repurposed parking spaces immediately in front of businesses, akin to parklets.
- » **Dining in the street**: either through taking multiple parking spaces along a designated street area, a travel lane closure, or full street closure.

According to the Los Angeles Department of Transportation, LA AI Fresco has been a success, with 1,350 businesses applying for sidewalk-dining permits and another 155 businesses requesting curbside dining in the first 18 months. Consequently, many businesses and elected officials are interested in converting this temporary outdoor dining program into a permanent mainstay in the city.

This research brief examines the relationship between eligibility for LA Al Fresco opportunities and street and sidewalk conditions across the city. We ask the following questions: How do the existing built environment and street characteristics constrain or enable participation in the LA Al Fresco program? How do constraints vary by neighborhood demographics? How do the patterns of eligibility relate to the patterns of participation? Looking ahead, what changes to the program should the city further consider as they make outdoor dining a more permanent part of Los Angeles's streetscape?





# **Methods**

The analysis is based on sidewalk-level data for commercial corridors in Los Angeles (**Table 1**). Using a sidewalk dataset available from the City of Los Angeles GeoHub Data Portal, we created sidewalk outlines for each property or land parcel. These outlines were then converted into line features with width data identified for each sidewalk segment. (The process was aided by a code created for a similar effort for New York City.) Sidewalks wider than 20 feet were consolidated to a 20-foot maximum value. The code process was not without limitations as not all commercial corridor line features were created due to code-related issues . We estimate that our final dataset covers 87% of Los Angeles's commercial sidewalks.

We next paired each sidewalk segment with its adjacent street speed limit and the associated socioeconomic characteristics of the surrounding neighborhood. We excluded sidewalk segments at corners and intersections to ensure the speed limit information was not connected to an incorrect street.

Table 1. Sidewalk Data

Data Type	Source and Details	Variables	
Sidewalk characteristics	Sidewalk polygons acquired from City of Los Angeles GeoHub, processed using code designed for generating sidewalk widths in New York City	» Sidewalk width	
Speed limits	Los Angeles Department of Transportation	» Speed limit either set by Los Angeles Municipal Code or default from the California Vehicle Code	
Land use	City of Los Angeles GeoHub General Plan Land Use	» Commercially zoned parcels	
Neighborhood boundaries	Los Angeles Times Mapping LA project	» City of LA neighborhoods (114)	
Neighborhood characteristics	American Community Survey 2014-2019, 5-year data (proportionally allocated from census tracts to neighborhood boundaries)	<ul> <li>» Majority white neighborhoods</li> <li>» Majority non-white neighborhoods</li> <li>» Neighborhoods by household income</li> </ul>	

The Los Angeles Department of Transportation provided a list of businesses that had applied for sidewalk and curbside dining permits between May 2020 and December 2021 for this analysis. The data are based on completed applications and may not relfect all businesses currently operating sidewalk dining. Some businesses applied but never operated sidewalk dining, while others operated sidewalk dining for a period but are not currently doing so.

Examples of sidewalk and curbside dining installations (Photo taken 2/2022 / courtesy of Madeline Brozen (left) and Claudia Bustamante (right))





# **Eligibility Criteria**

Using these data, we sought to determine whether a portion of a sidewalk in a commercial zone was eligible for one of the public LA Al Fresco programs — sidewalk, curbside, or street dining. Outdoor private dining opportunities were not considered in this eligibility screening because this analysis focuses on opportunities and constraints in the public right of way.

We used the guidelines in **Table 2** from LA Al Fresco to tag each sidewalk segment to determine eligibility in each of these outdoor dining options. We determined eligibility in three ways. First, we used 8 feet as the standard width required for sidewalk dining by combining standard clearance space outlined in the 2020-2021 LA AI Fresco guidelines (6 feet) with a minimum table size (2 feet). Second, we used a 6-foot minimum metric to reflect updated guidance from the Bureau of Engineering on sidewalk dining, adopted in November 2021. In the updated LA Al Fresco quidelines, the city reduced sidewalk clearance to 4 feet the for pedestrians and Americans with Disability Act (ADA) access (4 feet clearance + 2 feet table size). Third, specifically for curbside dining and dining in the street, we determined eligibility based on the adjacent speed limit. The maximum speed limit allowed for curbside and street dining is 30 mph and 35 mph, respectively. The street data available through LADOT only contained information with the speed limit and not the number of travel lanes so we were unable to incorporate that criteria into the analysis. Therefore, estimates about eligibility for curbside dining and dining in the street should be taken as best case scenarios.

Table 2. **Eligibility Criteria** 

LA Al Fresco Options	Eligible sidewalk criteria
Sidewalk dining	6-foot- or 8-foot-wide sidewalk
Curbside dining	Sidewalk with a maximum adjacent speed limit of 30 mph, wide enough to provide 6-foot clearance for pedestrian and ADA access, and streets with two travel lanes or less in each direction.
Dining in the street	Sidewalk with a maximum adjacent speed limit of 35 mph*1 and streets with two travel lanes or less in each direction.

<sup>1</sup> From May 2020 through March 2022, the LA Al Fresco application incorrectly listed the Dining in the Street eligibility at 25 mph while LADOT policy was set at 35 mph. It's unknown whether this error deterred would-be applicants.

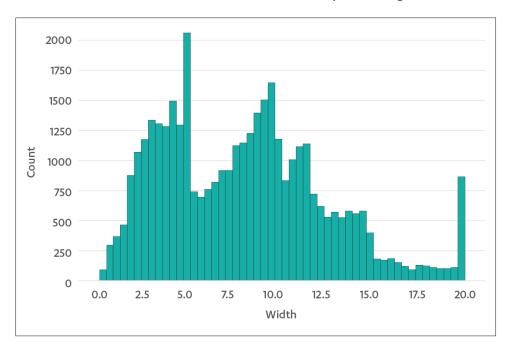
# Results

#### SIDEWALK WIDTHS AND OTHER CONSTRAINTS

We analyzed 977 miles of sidewalks across commercial areas of Los Angeles. The median sidewalk width across commercial districts is 7.7 feet. We relied on median values because of the bimodal distribution of sidewalk widths, as shown in **Figure 1**. We also found a great deal of variation by neighborhood in the median commercial sidewalk width, with Downtown Los Angeles and Westside neighborhoods having median commercial sidewalk widths of 10 feet or wider. In contrast, many areas in South Los Angeles, including Florence, Central-Alameda, and Broadway-Manchester had median commercial sidewalk widths of less than 4.5 feet (**Figure 2**)

Figure 1.

Distribution of commercial sidewalk widths in the City of Los Angeles



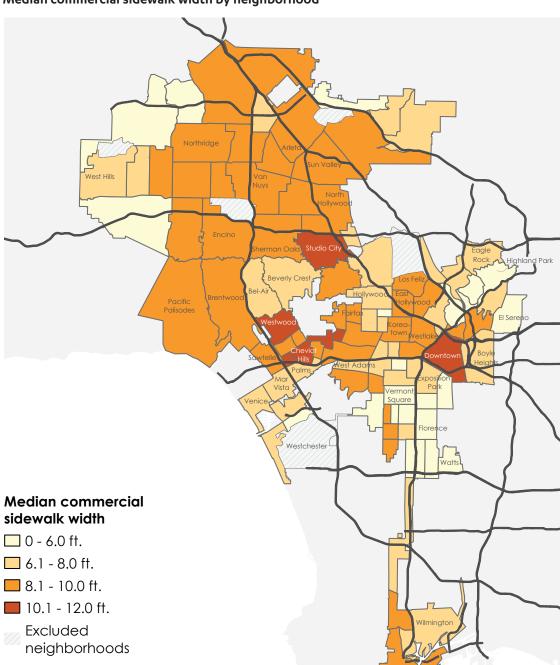


Figure 2. Median commercial sidewalk width by neighborhood

Narrow sidewalks meant only a portion of city streets are wide enough to participate in sidewalk dining while still maintaining adequate pedestrian clearance. With the original 6-foot clearance guidelines, 48% of the length of commercial sidewalks in the city could accommodate clearance and a 2-foot-wide table installation. Reducing pedestrian clearance to 4 feet increases the length of the eliqible sidewalks to 64% but still omits areas.

Narrow sidewalks combined with high speed limits along commercial corridors prevent businesses from the opportunity to participate in street dining. About 31% of sidewalk length in commercial districts is suitable for curbside dining (30 mph speed limit with appropriate sidewalk clearance), and 87% of sidewalk length in commercial districts citywide is eligible to host dining in the street (35 mph speed limit), but again this does not take into account whether or not the street has two or fewer travel lanes in each direction.

We further examined these eligibility patterns by median household income, and race and ethnicity, singularly and in combination. We found statistically significant differences in average sidewalk width between below-average and above-average income neighborhoods, and between majority white and majority people of color neighborhoods. In both cases, higher-income and majority-white areas had wider sidewalks and a greater length of sidewalks eligible for LA Al Fresco sidewalk dining within their commercial districts (**Table 3**).

This finding was not, however, consistent across all LA Al Fresco programs. We found higher percentages of eligibility in lower-income and majority non-white neighborhoods for curbside dining and dining in the street options. The lack of eligibility in the curbside dining is a function of both narrow sidewalks and high-speed streets. If curbside dining eligibility was using only speed limit considerations, eligibility would increase to 56% citywide, 58% in majority non-white neighborhoods, 45% in majority white neighborhoods, 60% in neighborhoods below averge income, and 43% in neighborhoods with above average income.

Using t-tests, we tested for significant differences between neighborhoods within the same income quartile but with different race/ethnicity compositions as outlined in tests A through D in **Table 4**. We found significant differences in the average sidewalk width in all tests, except for test A which compared lowest-income neighborhoods by race/ethnicity and found more similarly sized sidewalk widths. The overall findings demonstrate that even in areas with similar incomes, sidewalks in commercial districts were likely to be narrower in communities with a higher proportion of people of color.

Table 3. Sidewalk Characteristics by Neighborhood Race and Income

Sidewalk Characteristics	Citywide	Majority non- white	Majority white	Median HH income - Below average	Median HH income - Above average
Average sidewalk width (ft) (weighted by length)	7.7	7.7	8.0	7.6	7.7
Median sidewalk width (ft)	7.8	8.2	7.7	7.4	8.0
% of length sidewalk dining eligible – 4' clearance	64%	62%	68%	62%	65%
% of length sidewalk dining eligible – 6' clearance	48%	47%	50%	47%	50%
% of length curbside dining eligible	31%	32%	27%	33%	24%
% of length dining in the street eligible	88%	88%	90%	89%	82%

Table 4. Median Sidewalk Width and Race/Ethnicity Tests, Controlling for Income Quartile

Test	Neighborhood analysis universe	Average width in majority people of color neighborhoods	Average width in majority white neighborhoods	Findings
A	Bottom 25% household income quartile (Less than \$42,663)	7.5 ft.	7.1 ft.	No statisistically significant differences
В	25%-50% household income quartile (\$42,664– \$58,221)	7.6 ft.	8.4 ft.	Significant differences at the p < .001 level
С	50%-75% household income quartile (\$58,222–\$85,262)	7.6 ft.	7.9 ft.	Significant differences at the p < .001 level
D	Top 25% household income quartile (Greater than \$85,263)	6.8 ft.	8 ft.	Significant differences at the p < .001 level

#### SIDEWALK WIDTH AND SIDEWALK DINING

We analyzed neighborhood variation in the percent of sidewalk length eligible for sidewalk dining (**Figure 3**). Using the previous 6-foot sidewalk clearance standard, some neighborhoods had a sizable majority of their commercial roads where sidewalks were wide enough for outdoor dining. For example, in Cheviot Hills, Mount Washington, Arleta, Downtown Los Angeles, and Westwood, more than 70% of their sidewalk length was over 8 feet wide. In contrast, in Palms, Highland Park, El Sereno, and Watts, less than 35% of the sidewalk length was wide enough to support sidewalk dining for restaurants along their commercial corridors. After reducing the sidewalk clearance to 4 feet, an average of 14% more sidewalks across the city became eligible for sidewalk dining. Even with this loosening of clearance restrictions, however, some neighborhoods still had a limited portion of sidewalks available. In El Sereno, the percent of eligible sidewalks increased slightly from 29% to 34%. In Watts, it increased from 28% to 44%.

Figure 3.

Percent of commercial sidewalks eligible for sidewalk dining by neighborhood

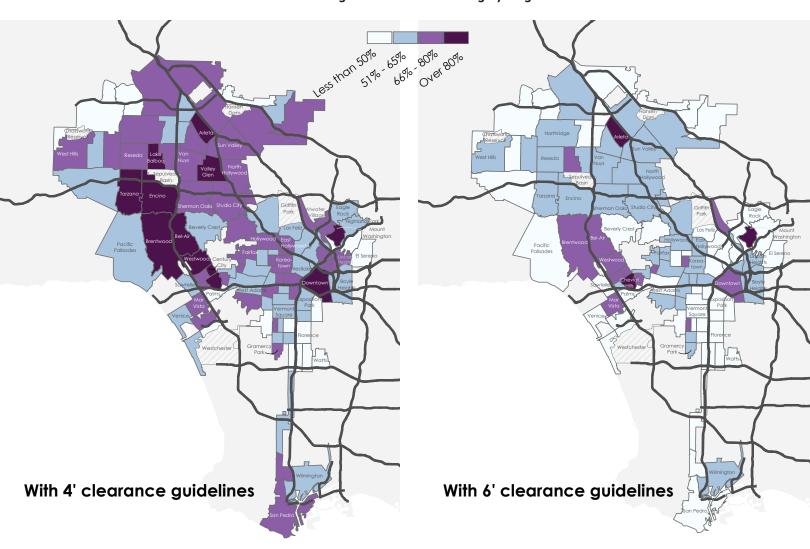
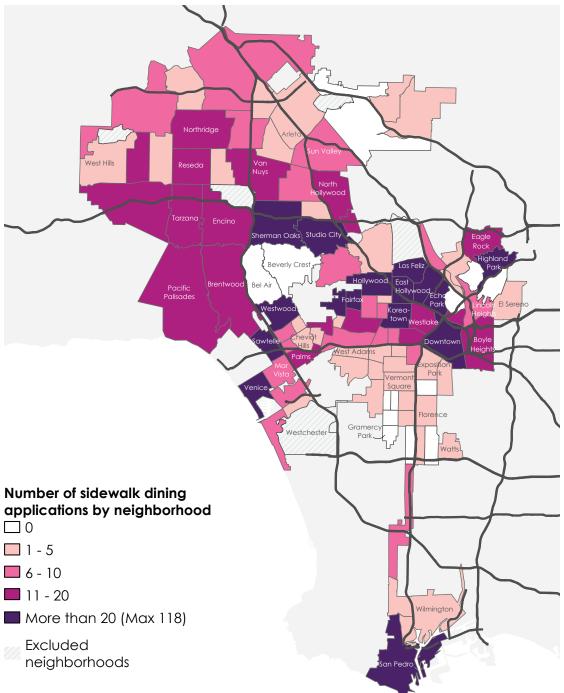


Figure 4. Number of sidewalk dining applications by neighborhood



Using the data provided by LADOT, we mapped the number of applicants for sidewalk dining by neighborhood (Figure 4). We found a high level of neighborhood concentration in LA Al Fresco sidewalk dining: Half of the city's sidewalk dining locations were concentrated in 11, or 10%, of LA's neighborhoods: Downtown Los Angeles, Koreatown, Hollywood, Venice, Beverly Grove, Sawtelle, Sherman Oaks, Fairfax, Studio City, East Hollywood, and Silver Lake. These neighborhoods had more than 30 sidewalk dining applications each. In contrast, 14 neighborhoods had zero sidewalk dining applications. Of those, seven neighborhoods were located in and around South Los Angeles.

We found both expected and unexpected trends when comparing the percent of sidewalks eliqible to the number of applicants per neighborhood. Downtown Los Angeles had the highest number of sidewalk dining applicants and the highest percent of commercial sidewalks that could be eligible (based on both the 4-foot and 6-foot clearance). This was also true in Westwood with wide sidewalks and a lot of sidewalk dining. But neighborhoods with a high percentage of eligible commercial streets did not always have a high number of sidewalk dining activations. Conversely, neighborhoods with a lot of sidewalk dining like Silver Lake did not have a high percent of eligible sidewalks. We found a 2% to 5% correlation in the relationship between percent of eligible sidewalks and applicants likely meaning there are other factors relating to the participation in the sidewalk dining program beyond sidewalk space alone.

#### **CURBSIDE DINING**

Regarding curbside dining eligibility, 31% of sidewalks citywide were widen enough and located on streets with speed limits low enough to be eligible. The trends by neighborhood varied significantly and on average, 27% of commercial streets in any given neighborhood were eligible (Figure 5).

Curbside dining locations were more concentrated than sidewalk dining (Figure 6). Of the 153 curbside dining applications, 50% were located in five neighborhoods: Downtown Los Angeles, Venice, Westwood, Windsor Square, and Boyle Heights. We also found concentration along particular streets in some of these neighborhoods. Larchmont Boulevard hosts all of the curbside dining in Windsor Square, and Cesar Chavez Avenue and 1st Street host all curbside dining in Boyle Heights.

Figure 5. Curbside dining eligibility by neighborhood

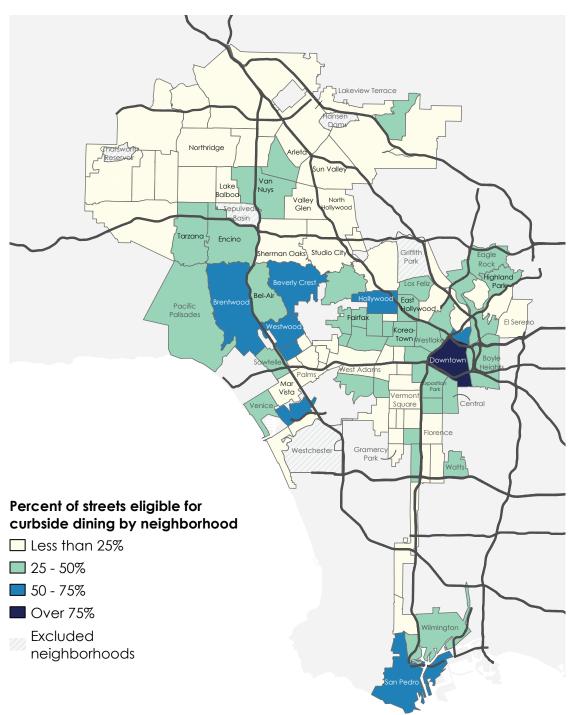
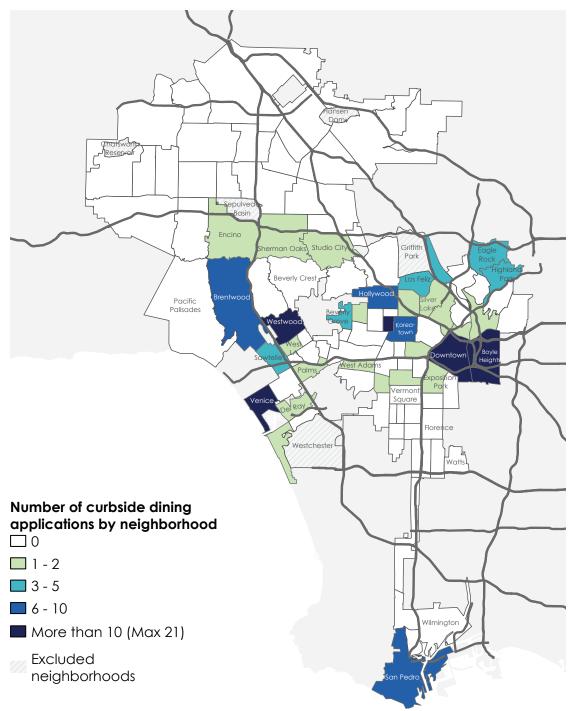


Figure 6. Curbside dining by neighborhood



# Conclusions and Recommendations

This analysis highlights the existing constraints businesses face when seeking opportunities to safely serve customers outdoors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, differences in where businesses elected to take advantage of these LA Al Fresco offerings demonstrate that the built environment alone is not enough of a predictor of participation. Looking ahead, the City of Los Angeles should consider further adjustments to the outdoor dining program guidelines and other regulations to ensure the benefits accrue to the maximum number of businesses. We offer the following recommendations for adjustments:

# 1) LOOK FOR OPPORTUNITIES TO WIDEN SIDEWALKS IN COMMERCIAL DISTRICTS, PRIORITIZING LOWER-INCOME COMMUNITIES OF COLOR.

Narrow sidewalks present the biggest barrier for participation in LA Al Fresco and create unnesessary friction among different sidewalk uses, users, and priorities. Narrow sidewalks may create conflicts for maintaining ADA access, installing bus benches and shelters, planting street trees, or providing spaces for street vendors. There is less competition for scarce pedestrianoriented space in the right of way and opportunities to create a more vibrant street activity with wider sidewalks.

Widening sidewalks is a potentially costly endeavor, especially given the size of Los Angeles. The Safe Sidewalks LA program is one existing mechanism to improve and widen sidewalks. In December 2016, the city launched this \$1.4 billion program to repair sidewalks and make them more accessible. The city ought to prioritize sidewalk requests and repairs in neighborhoods with narrow sidewalks in communities of color to increase access.

This program, however, was intended to handle the existing backlog of sidewalks in disrepair and may not have the capacity to address existing disparities in sidewalk width. Therefore, city officials looking to widen sidewalks should consider non-traditional options, such as temporary sidewalk extensions like platforms or painted extensions.

# 2) UNDERSTAND THAT BUSINESSES LIKELY NEED ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS TO PARTICIPATE IN LA AL FRESCO.

Even if sidewalks were wide enough to support sidewalk dining, businesses in low-income communities of color likely need further supports from the city to encourage participation. Businesses may not have the resources to purchase outdoor furniture or the staff capacity to manage outdoor space. In addition to ensuring businesses in these communities have enough space to participate, the city may need to partner with economic development departments to help provide resources to overcome these barriers for participating in LA Al Fresco's sidewalk or street dining options.





Examples of sidewalk dining failing to maintain clearance (Photos taken 9/2020 / courtesy of Rabi Abonour (left) and 10/2020 / courtesy of Alissa Walker (right))

City departments should look to encourage new participation among businesses that need further assistance, rather than institute new parameters that would seek to reduce the number of participants in some areas (such as quotas or maximum number of participants).

# 3) PLACE GUARDRAILS IN THE LA AL FRESCO APPLICATION TO ENSURE APPLICANTS MAINTAIN ADA CLEARANCE.

Businesses interested in participating in the LA Al Fresco program were required to provide only minimal information on the sidewalk characteristics and their proposed configuration of tables and seating. The requirements did not mandate that applicants measure the width of their sidewalk, tables, or chairs or indicate whether there were any other sidewalk obstructions such as tree wells, newspaper stands, hydrants, etc. It was likely difficult for the reviewing departments, in their haste to pivot quickly during the pandemic, to ensure whether each proposed sidewalk treatment would maintain ADA clearance without such information. As a result, some LA Al Fresco treatments likely did not provide the mandated clearance (e.g., see photos above) and reduced access to those in wheelchairs and other mobility devices. The LA Al Fresco program should require more detailed measurements of sidewalks, obstructions, and furniture in the application itself, especially given the recent reduction in required clearance.

The need for careful consideration of accomodations and inclusion is not limited to sidewalk dining alone. This lack of accomodation often occurs when the curbside dining or dining in the street treatment is not flush with the sidewalk, requiring a step down into the road bed (see photo pq. 20). Overall, the city can also help to enforce sidewalk clearance and non-compliant curbside dining or dining in the street installations by adding a complaint category to existing systems like the MyLA311 system to allow people to file a complaint and initiate an investigation.



Curbside dining installation without platform flush to sidewalk (Photo taken 2/2022 / courtesy of Madeline Brozen)

# 4) LOWER SPEED LIMITS ALONG COMMERCIAL CORRIDORS AND RECONSIDER CURBSIDE DINING SPEED LIMIT GUIDELINES.

Far fewer streets could benefit from curbside dining than sidewalk dining due to high speed limits. Recent state legislative changes allow cities to reduce speed limits by 5 mph in business districts, and the City of Los Angeles began this process by introducing a motion to reduce speeds on 77 street segments totally 177 miles of roadways. However, only eight of these 77 proposed street segments will have speed limits reduced enough to be eligible for curbside dining per current regulations (30 mph).

During the next rounds of speed limit reduction efforts, the city could also examine reducing speed limits in corridors where LA Al Fresco eligibility is low. This would potentially have the benefits of enabling additional outdoor dining, increasing economic developement and addressing transportation safety. Lowering speed limits should also be prioritized where narrow sidewalks prevent businesses from participating in sidewalk dining. Furthermore, enabling curbside dining rather than sidewalk dining could reduce potential conflicts between diners and pedestrians (e.g., see pg. 21).



Curbside dining installation flush with curb that maintains sidewalk clearance. (Photo taken 2/2022 / courtesy of Madeline Brozen)

Alternatively, the city could also consider reasonable amendments to the speed limit regulations for participating in the curbside and street dining programs. Small, incremental changes would similarly allow more businesses to take advantage of these LA Al Fresco offerings. When more businesses can take advantage of curbside or dining in the street, they can receive the benefits of LA Al Fresco dining without creating sidewalk conflicts. Therefore, a recommended approach is to combine loosening speed limit guidelines and work to reduce speed limits with an eye toward mutually beneficial policies in traffic safety and economic development.

Through a combination of low barriers to entry and quick approval times, LA Al Fresco was able to help support thousands of businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic, likely helping many stay afloat. But the existing sidewalk and street characteristics meant that eligibility across businesses and neighborhoods was uneven. Given this, decision-makers must take these disparities into account to ensure more businesses, especially those owned by Black, Indigenous, people of color, take full advantage as LA Al Fresco becomes a permanent part of the city's landscape.

