



## **Committee of the Whole Report**

### **For the Meeting of April 22, 2021**

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**To:** Committee of the Whole **Date:** April 9, 2021  
**From:** Kerri Moore, Head of Business & Community Relations  
**Subject:** Build Back Victoria Program and Government Street Pedestrian-Priority Initiatives Update

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### **RECOMMENDATION**

That Council:

1. Direct staff to bring forward recommendations to update and extend the current Business Recovery from Pandemic Bylaw (#20-072) prior to October 31, 2021 in order to support continued economic recovery
2. That the above motions be forwarded to the daytime meeting of April 22, 2021 for ratification.

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Build Back Victoria (BBV) program and associated Business Recovery from Pandemic Bylaw (#20-072) was introduced in June 2020. The program allowed businesses to temporarily expand their operating capacity into public spaces such as parks, sidewalks, streets, and boulevards to respond to public health requirements associated with COVID-19. Build Back Victoria also helped to establish additional space for pedestrian activity and social gathering in several locations across the municipality, including Government Street. The initial phase of BBV included more than 100 business participants, and streetscape and traffic management interventions on Government Street between Yates and Humboldt.

In October 2020, Council approved an extension of the bylaw until October 31, 2021, to align with the Provincial temporary expanded service area authorization for approved liquor licenses. At the same time, the City introduced new requirements for insurance, accessibility requirements, winterization features and updated the digital application process. As of April 7, 2021, there are 47 approved BBV permits with 16 applications under review.

Council also directed staff to report back in Spring 2021 with proposed improvements for the program based on public feedback and to provide recommendations on whether Government Street should be closed between Fort Street and View Street for the spring/summer 2021 season.

To help gauge the level of community and stakeholder support and gather ideas to improve BBV, staff conducted a public engagement process from February 1 to March 2, 2021. Opportunities to participate were promoted through print advertisements, digital newsletters, email and social media.

The outcomes from public engagement, along with stakeholder feedback, indicate that both the BBV program and pedestrian-priority treatments on Government Street have successfully supported recovery efforts and contributed to Council's Strategic Priorities and set a new level of expectation from the public and businesses on how the City manages the use of public spaces and streets for private and commercial uses.

Demand for the BBV program continues to increase as the warmer weather approaches and new health orders are introduced. Staff are processing applications and preparing for continued pedestrian-priority treatments on Government Street in June 2021 with modifications based on business and public feedback. Recent Provincial Orders restricting indoor food service for a number of weeks has added significant momentum to the number of applications.

## **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this report is to present public and stakeholder feedback on the BBV program and to recommended next steps to maintain the successes of the program and advance Council's Strategic Priority action for permanent pedestrian priority initiatives on Government Street.

## **BACKGROUND**

The goal of the BBV Program is to provide a nimble, affordable and flexible permitting process to support economic recovery for businesses by allowing them to operate in public spaces across the City. The program was designed with a commitment to learn and adapt to protect the livability, viability and accessibility of public spaces.

In October 2020, Council directed staff to engage with the public and businesses on Build Back Victoria initiatives to help inform the spring and summer program. The goal was to hear ideas and gain insights from businesses, residents and visitors about the initiatives and how they could be improved through 2021. The engagement process was undertaken between February 1 to March 2, 2021 and included both public and targeted stakeholder consultation.

Opportunities were promoted through:

1. City of Victoria website: [victoria.ca/bizresources](https://victoria.ca/bizresources)
2. 'Have Your Say' engagement platform
3. City E-News: February 2021 edition
4. Direct emails to the licensed businesses in Victoria
5. Social media
6. Newspaper advertisements
7. Media relations

Staff also worked with the Victoria Community Association Network, Victoria Chamber of Commerce, Destination Greater Victoria, Downtown Victoria Business Association, The Bay Centre, Greater Victoria Placemaking Network, City of Victoria Art in Public Places Committee, the Active Transportation Advisory Committee, and the Victoria Youth Council to promote the feedback opportunity.

More than 780 online surveys were completed with over 8,700 comments. The City also held a stakeholder focus group that included representatives from the Downtown Victoria Business Association, the Bay Centre, the Chamber of Commerce and Destination Greater Victoria, among others, to gather direct feedback about the BBV program and pedestrian priority initiatives on Government Street. Project team staff also canvassed all businesses on Government Street between Yates and Humboldt, visiting businesses in-person and delivering a letter outlining changes to the program under consideration with an invitation for written feedback. The City's Neighbourhood Liaisons approached all neighbourhood associations to provide an opportunity for feedback and suggestions on future improvements to the program, as well as to help promote the broader engagement to residents. A full engagement summary of all activities and complete copy of survey responses is included in Appendix A & B.

## **ISSUES & ANALYSIS**

### **Community Feedback**

Since the launch of BBV in June 2020, staff have been responsive to feedback from businesses and community groups and have made practical adjustments along the way to improve the success of the program for businesses. The online survey focused on collecting insights on how the program could best meet the needs of businesses and the community in 2021, while balancing broader City objectives of livability, accessibility, recreation and mobility. Survey respondents included businesses, residents, and visitors.

Over 80% of survey respondents were satisfied with the Build Back Victoria program and comments were generally in favour of the program continuing. Highlights of key insights provided through comments on the various BBV program elements are included below.

#### **Patios, Flex Spaces and Temporary Loading Spaces:**

- The majority of survey respondents liked temporary patios and flex spaces and indicated they wanted to see more in the City
- There was a desire for more permanent infrastructure to beautify areas and create a more cohesive look (i.e.: planter boxes, tables, chairs, bollards)
- Respondents emphasized the importance of maintenance / cleaning by businesses
- Some concerns were voiced about the loss of on-street parking to facilitate patios and flex spaces. Others supported converting more parking stalls to support loading and customer pick up / delivery.

#### **Mobile Vendors and Business in Parks:**

- Businesses in parks were generally well-liked by respondents. Respondents commented that businesses worked best when they balanced the needs of other park users
- Some voiced concern over the suitability of parks to host businesses while bylaws were in place that supported temporary sheltering measures
- Food trucks were generally well-liked. Many commented they wanted more food trucks as long as they did not conflict with brick-and-mortar businesses, managed their waste and minimized noise pollution
- Many wanted more mobile vendors outside of the downtown core and the creation of a real-time map to help locate vendors.

#### Street closures:

- Many commented that street closures supported a more vibrant streetscape for businesses and public activity
- Many expressed they would like to see more live music / entertainment / animation, increased signage for wayfinding (pedestrians and vehicle traffic), lighting, secure bicycle parking and incorporation of art and artisan vendors into street animations
- Some concerns were voiced about accessibility for seniors and people with mobility challenges, traffic navigation and flow, access for tourist buses and delivery challenges
- Some commented that more pick-up zones and short-term parking were needed to accommodate businesses.

Respondents also shared their general concerns regarding accessibility of, and corporate use of, public spaces and the prioritization of curb for uses other than vehicle storage or loading. It was recognized that the successful use of public space was, in part, linked to the temporary changes in Provincial regulations regarding liquor licencing put in place during the pandemic.

#### Government Street Pedestrian-Priority Measures

The City also gathered specific feedback on the pedestrian-priority measures introduced on Government Street in 2020. Overall, there was strong support to see interventions continue and be enhanced further in 2021 and beyond.

#### Suggestions for improvements included:

- Maintain commercial loading and delivery functions along the street
- Consider a timed-closure, rather than a “hard” closure, of Government Street between Fort Street and View Street from some businesses and the associated changes to deliveries.
- Expand the pedestrian-priority zone so that there was a more consistent approach to the street, incorporating a mix of patio spaces, public seating and performance spaces, in appropriate locations.
- Incorporate better signage, design cues and continuity to more clearly define pedestrian-priority areas along the street
- Incorporate more public seating areas, activities and programming
- Use higher quality and more attractive furnishings and traffic calming measures
- Incorporate planters to soften the streetscape and establish additional ‘greenery’
- Incorporate more distinctive, colourful and playful elements
- Support pedi-cabs, slow cycling, and other non-motorized transportation

In response, staff are planning modified pedestrian-priority measures on Government Street for summer 2021 to include:

- Establishing a pedestrian-priority zone from Humboldt Street to View Street. This would include a timed daily motor vehicle travel restriction between noon and 10 p.m.
  - This approach will provide more consistency, continuity and legibility of pedestrian-priority treatments while balancing business delivery needs.
  - The proposed time of day for the pedestrian-priority zone is based on consultation with businesses and the pre-existing loading zone regulations on Government Street.

- In the near term, trialling a time-based closure provides insights and learning to inform future designs concepts and operations on the corridor. Specific times of day can be modified based on experience in the field and evolving public health orders.
- Maintaining vehicle circulation, commercial pick-up and delivery functions on Government Street itself between 10 p.m. and noon the following day.
  - Similar to interventions introduced in 2020, staff will consider other changes on the corridor to reduce vehicle through volumes and speeds while maintaining local access.
  - Additional loading zones can be established on adjacent streets based on business needs.
- Maintaining full time vehicle access, circulation and street parking from View to Yates Street where businesses did not utilize the additional street space in 2020.
- Incorporating new accessible parking stalls in priority locations to expand access and parking options for people with disabilities.
- Incorporating more attractive and welcoming furnishings, gateway treatments and other streetscape elements as distinct character defining elements of the street, specifically:
  - Wood slab picnic tables and benches for public use
  - Planters for landscaping and flowers to complement the hanging basket program
  - New seating platforms that double as small stages for performances and playable elements along the street
  - Better signage
- Allowing pedicab and cycling traffic along the street while traffic restrictions are in effect.
- Introducing programming, additional street activities and entertainment, building on the initial program undertaken in 2020.

Given the nature of the pedestrian-priority treatments proposed, adjustments can occur through the upcoming summer season, with the interventions adapted as necessary to respond to new health requirements, business or community-led placemaking initiatives.

These treatments can extend beyond summer 2021 to continue to advance Council's strategic objective for creating a pedestrian-priority Government Street and will inform the longer-term streetscape design. Staff will be bringing forward a report to Council this summer with a recommended vision and concept for permanent pedestrian-priority measures. At that time, staff will be recommending early actions for streetscaping and permanent traffic management and circulation changes with the associated budget estimates being brought forward as part of the 2022 Financial Plan process. Staff are currently working with our underground utility group to review implications to expediting the watermain installation on Government Street to 2022 so it is completed prior to when tourism is currently projected to return to pre-pandemic levels.

#### Program Continuation and Resource Requirements:

The Build Back Victoria program has been designed and delivered using existing staff and budget resources. There are no current permit or application fees for any of the program options. The program was implemented to quickly respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, offering a "bureaucracy-lite" approach to meet the diverse needs for businesses to operate under changing public health

restrictions. The program relies on the temporary stewardship of public space with expectations that applicants will take responsibility for the management and maintenance of the space.

With the on-going feedback received during the BBV program, and through the more formal public and business engagement process, it has become evident that there is a broad level of desire and expectations from both businesses and the public to see many elements of this program continue after BBV in its current format has ended. The current Sidewalk Patio Bylaw, which was last updated in 2016, would benefit from a modernization to apply lessons learned from Build Back Victoria.

Delivering the current program has impacted approved workplans, particularly within the Business Hub and the Transportation Division. The planning, development, public and business outreach, and future management of a permanent “steady state” program (including aspects such as design guidelines, fees, terms and conditions of applications, and internal review and approval processes as well as the upkeep and maintenance of the enhanced streetscape measures and landscaping) will need additional and ongoing staff resources which will be brought forward for consideration by Council as part of the 2022 Financial Plan deliberations.

In the absence of a full update to the Sidewalk Patio Bylaw being identified within current 2021 work plans, plus the anticipated additional staffing requirements to support this, an extension to the Business Recovery from Pandemic Bylaw (#20-072), either in its current format or modified based on the public health landscape in the fall of 2021, is recommended.

City staff continue to participate in bi-weekly Business Support meetings with local business leaders and are increasingly aware of estimates on the timing for the full recovery of the local economy and resumption of key tourism industries. With recovery predicted to likely extend into 2023, the continuation of the BBV program should be anticipated and planned for now.

## **OPTIONS & IMPACTS**

**Option 1: That Council direct staff to bring forward recommendations to update and extend the current Business Recovery from Pandemic Bylaw (#20-072) prior to October 31, 2021 in order to support continued economic recovery. (*Recommended*)**

The Build Back Victoria Program continues to be a success. Recent public health restrictions have resulted in increased demand for the program including patios, flex zones, business in parks and mobile vendors. Based on the City’s experience with BBV to date and a desire to support continued use of public space, it is recommended that Staff return to Council with proposed amendments to Bylaw #20-072 to enable the program to continue and allow time to transition existing bylaws which support the corporate and community use of public space.

**Option 2: That Council direct staff to prepare for the conclusion of the Build Back Victoria Program at the planned October 31, 2021 per existing Business Recovery from Pandemic Bylaw.**

Staff and business leaders predict recovery to likely extend into 2023. The conclusion of the BBV program as of October 31, 2021 could impact efforts to sustain viability and the local economy through to recovery.

### *Accessibility Impact Statement*

Using streets, boulevards and plazas for commerce purposes keeps sidewalks, pathways, and walkways to remain free and clear from customers queuing and waiting for services. Requirements in the BBV Program guidelines include accessible design features, such as accessible ramps and patio widths, cane detectable physical barriers on sidewalk edge, contrasting colours of materials, and firm, stable and slip-resistant surfaces. Staff continue to recommend that businesses speak with their patrons who have a disability and disability service organizations to see what other accommodations might be suitable for their specific location and business service.

### *Impacts to Financial Plan*

The BBV Program has so far been delivered with existing staff and budget resources in the 2021 Financial Plan. A \$100,000 grant application to offset material costs and support community animation through 2021 has been submitted under the Canada Healthy Communities Initiative fund. This work, however, has associated impacts to the delivery of other planned priorities. Continuation of the current BBV program to enable ongoing and increased corporate and community use of public streets and spaces will help to achieve several policies identified in the Official Community Plan and Go Victoria.

As a part of the 2022 Financial Plan, staff will recommend new resources that are required to undertake a renewal of current programs and associated bylaws to support the ongoing management of the program in future years. Adjustments to the operating budgets within Engineering and Public Works will also be reviewed to ensure the high standard of maintenance and cleaning of Government Street is provided. Similarly, adjustments to support new landscaping maintenance of planters and other vegetated features on the corridor will be included in the Parks, Recreation and Facilities operating budget.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The Business Recovery from Pandemic Bylaw has given businesses expanded operating options by using public space to meet Provincial Health recommendations. The program has been broadly welcomed by businesses, the public, and other stakeholders and is approved to continue to October 31, 2021. Given the experiences of BBV and the feedback received, a continuation of the program with a number of planned improvements, is beneficial beyond this date both to continue to support economic recovery and to allow the undertaking of a full review and update to the current established bylaws for consideration by Council in 2022.

Pedestrian-priority treatments on Government Street were introduced in 2020 to support enhanced physical distancing and animation. Modifications to the 2020 streetscape and traffic management measures are planned in the coming weeks and will continue to inform the development of the future permanent Government Street pedestrian priority measures.

Respectfully submitted,

Quinn Anglin  
Business Ambassador

Kerri Moore  
Head of Business & Community Relations

**Report accepted and recommended by the City Manager.**  
**List of Attachments**

Appendix A – Build Back Victoria Engagement Summary Report  
Appendix B – Build Back Victoria Survey Responses