

COVID-19's Impact on Public Safety: The repurposing of parking lots and public spaces requires new safety measures

By Warren C. Vander Helm Parking Design Group | June 22, 2020



USDA Photo by Lance Cheung

On April 17, Arturo Franco Melendez was volunteering with a food drive at First Southern Baptist Church in Los Angeles. It was the end of a week that saw a staggering number of deaths and unemployment claims across the United States, due to the swift spread of COVID-19. According to CBS Los Angeles, 58-year-old Melendez had been a volunteer at the food bank for years and was doing his part to help with an increase in demand.ⁱ As he was loading items into the back of one car, a driver behind him mistakenly accelerated. Melendez was pinned between the two vehicles and killed.

Another tragic accident at a food bank in Miami Gardens, Florida on March 11 resulted in one death and multiple injuries after a driver unintentionally reversed into a line of people waiting outside.ⁱⁱ And on May 4, a 13-year-old boy was injured when he was pinned between two vehicles while volunteering at a food drive in Ligonier, Indiana.

As consultants in the parking industry, our team at Parking Design Group is sadly familiar with accidents like these. With unfortunate frequency, we are asked to serve as expert witnesses on vehicle caused deaths in parking lots and other areas where cars are close to pedestrians, such as walk-up ATMs, outdoor seating areas, and drive-through services to name a few examples. Often they happen

due to pedal confusion, incidents where a driver hits the gas instead of the brake and jumps a curb, drives through a storefront, or as we have seen in the instances above, pins people between two vehicles.

We strive to prevent these tragedies through consultation on layout and safety measures to mitigate risk wherever pedestrians are in close proximity to moving cars. Unfortunately, we see a lot of resistance to preventative safety measures. It usually is not until an accident occurs and the owner of a parking lot is facing a lawsuit that these issues are addressed.

Now there are a host of new risks to consider, following the repurposing of public spaces for a variety of uses in response to COVID-19. Instead of indoor or walk-up food banks, church and school parking lots have transformed into drive-through donation pickup sites. Drivers are asked to stay in their cars while groceries are loaded for them in order to minimize contact.

Curbsides are also increasingly active as pickup locations for retailers, and as restaurants and businesses expand out onto sidewalks and streets.

Before COVID-19, the US experienced an average of 50,000 accidents, 60,000 injuries, and an estimated 500 deaths each year in parking lots, the vast majority pedestrians. We know that whenever you bring pedestrians and cars closer together, those numbers go up.

In repurposing parking lots, curbs, sidewalks, and streets for the sake of mitigating one risk, another one is being ignored.

Physical Distancing as a Safety Measure Can Also Become a Safety Concern

COVID-19 has forced all of us to rethink how we interact with public spaces. But this increase in physical distancing is also leading to a decrease in space between people and cars.

Food banks and COVID-testing sites in parking lots came first. Now we are seeing businesses reopen, but often only if they can guarantee enough space for their customers to appropriately spread out. For restaurants and shops, this can mean expanding into parking lots, sidewalks, and newly closed streets.

“A business owner has to be mindful of parking lot safety,” says Rob Reiter, a consultant in curbside and parking lot safety and co-founder of the Storefront Safety Council. “When he or she finally has the chance to reopen and expand outdoor seating areas, consulting with an expert might not be the first thing that comes to mind, but it absolutely should be.”

Just last week, in Altoona, Pennsylvania, a driver pulled up to Herbology Dispensary for curbside pickup. When he accidentally hit the gas instead of the brake, he smashed through the glass and brick of the storefront, landing in the waiting room where several people were injured. Luckily, no one was killed.

Cities are also under pressure to create the conditions under which businesses can reopen. In many cities including Portland, Oregon and Los Angeles, California that means streamlining the process for restaurants to open or expand into outdoor seating. In Oregon, the Liquor Control Commission expedited the process for restaurants to apply for sidewalk liquor licenses.ⁱⁱⁱ And in Los Angeles, Mayor Eric Garcetti recently announced L.A. Al Fresco, a program that will help restaurants reopen faster “by temporarily relaxing the rules that regulate outdoor dining.”^{iv}

On top of approving outdoor dining permits, cities are considering applications to close down streets to vehicles. Ashland, Oregon, which suffered a significant economic blow in the cancellation of the town’s flagship attraction, The Oregon Shakespeare Festival, will close a large stretch of Main Street each weekend for much of the summer to make room for businesses and visitors to spread out.



Photo by John Richards from Pexels

In this rush to reopen and repurpose, we see the potential for disaster.

“During these times of necessary repurposing of parking lots and streets, it is imperative that it is done in a well-thought-out manner to mitigate dangers associated with mingling of pedestrians and vehicles. This is especially critical when we start to invite pedestrian gatherings onto areas we naturally see as otherwise reserved for vehicular traffic flow.” *David Vogel, Parking Design Group*

Taking Measures to Avoid New Health Risks for Drivers and Pedestrians

Many aspects of our day-to-day lives have changed very quickly in recent months. We have adapted to wearing masks in public and washing our hands more frequently. We set up home offices and learned to cook more at home.

But some changes require more in-depth considerations. When it comes to the repurposing of parking lots, sidewalks and streets we must take the time to do it right.

“Vehicles in parking lots are a lot like sharks in the ocean,” says Reiter. “Shark attacks are unlikely when you are sitting on the sand. But if you wade out into the water, your risk goes up.” Reiter says curbside pickup lines and outdoor seating areas set up in parking spaces are essentially shark territory. “If people are seated in the same areas where vehicles are moving, the likelihood for tragedy is simply going to increase.”

Solutions may not be obvious to the business owner who is desperately trying to reopen or to city planners under pressure to help businesses get back on their feet after being forced to close or limit business for months. But parking consultants are experts with extensive experience and training to prevent these tragedies.

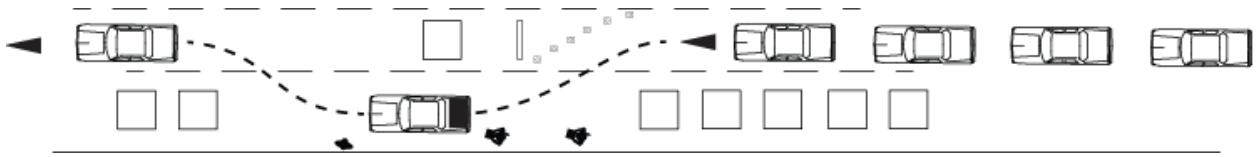
There are simple and relatively inexpensive measures that can be taken to keep both drivers and pedestrians safe. Even as we move forward with reimagining our cities and towns now and for physical distancing in the future, we do not have to trade one risk for another.

When temporarily closing streets for the expansion of businesses, crash tested barriers must be put in place to prevent vehicles from entering these newly created pedestrian-only areas. A small sign on a safety cone saying “STREET CLOSED” or redirecting drivers to alternate routes may not prevent someone who is alcohol-impaired, or simply caught off guard by the new traffic pattern, from crashing into a crowd of people. Liability for businesses and cities increases as taking measures for prevention of foreseeable tragedies decreases.

Some important recommendations for property owners and organizations re-purposing parking lots and outdoor spaces for these services:

- Safety bollards should be installed around new sidewalk or parking lot seating for restaurants.
- Parking spots should not face outdoor seating areas, but if there are no other options, safety bollards should be installed between the front of vehicles and seated customers.
- Make a traffic circulation plan with safety in mind. Faster moving vehicles entering or exiting an area should be separated from stationary vehicles in line for services.
- Design pickup lines for cars to pull in parallel to each other, rather than bumper-to-bumper, reducing the risk of people getting pinned between vehicles.

- If a pick up line must be employed, create a loading pull-out where the vehicle being loaded is situated parallel to, but one lane to the left or right of the line of vehicles.



- Ease congestion by designating pickup and drop-off points that are separate from traffic circulation.
- Map out access points where cars and volunteers interact and clearly mark “no go areas” for vehicles to prevent intrusions where volunteers are staging.
- Train staff and volunteers in safety and traffic plans, clearly communicate with signs, and clearly delineate lanes so that drivers are not confused. And remember -- **speed kills**.

As we continue to adjust to this new reality and repurpose our public spaces, we must also continue to develop safety measures that will prevent accidents. And we must continue to have these conversations as we all venture into new territory and invent the “temporary new normal”.

These ideas are offered in an effort to promote safety and dialogue and have been authored by Warren C. Vander Helm, and David Vogel, Partners at Parking Design Group LLP
www.parkingdesigngroup.com

ⁱ <https://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2020/04/18/man-dies-after-traffic-accident-at-sylmar-food-drive/>

ⁱⁱ <https://miami.cbslocal.com/2020/03/11/at-least-1-dead-several-others-injured-in-miami-gardens-crash/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.oregonlive.com/dining/2020/05/oregon-restaurants-bars-get-green-light-to-expand-alcohol-sales-to-sidewalks-streets.html>

^{iv} <https://corona-virus.la/laalfresco>