

Report to Council



Date: November 16, 2020

To: Council

From: City Manager

Subject: Bernard Avenue Road Closure – Assessment of 2020 and Recommendations for 2021

Department: Real Estate, Active Living and Culture, and Parks Planning Departments

Recommendation:

THAT Council receive, for information, the report of Real Estate, Active Living and Culture, and Parks Planning departments dated November 16, 2020, with respect to the Bernard Avenue Road Closure;

AND THAT Council direct staff to operationalize the closure of the 200 and 300 blocks of Bernard Avenue during the summer months on an annual basis;

AND THAT Council direct staff to work with stakeholders to develop and animate a demonstration “Green Street” on the 400 and 500 blocks of Bernard Avenue for the summer of 2021, as described in the Report from the Real Estate Department dated November 16, 2020;

AND FURTHER THAT Council direct staff to bring forward necessary bylaw amendments and guidelines to implement the recommendations in the report from the Real Estate, Active Living and Culture, and Parks Planning Departments dated November 16, 2020.

Purpose:

To update Council on “lessons learned” associated with the temporary vehicular closure of Bernard Avenue and to make recommendations pertaining to the on-going seasonal closure of vehicular traffic on Bernard Avenue in 2021 and beyond.

Background:

In the spring of 2020, the City of Kelowna (the “City”) made a decision to close four blocks of Bernard Avenue as part of an economic recovery tool to support local business and to increase the pedestrian realm, thereby allowing for expanded social distancing in the downtown core. This report summarizes the data and observations that were collected during this closure. As well, this report will assess the success of the initiative, lessons learned and recommendations for coming years.

Participating Businesses

Twenty-three (23) businesses within the closure area of Bernard Avenue participated in the roadway program, including 21 food establishments and 2 retailers. A total of 10,661 sq. ft. of additional patio space

was created, resulting in 443 additional restaurant seats. A breakdown of business participation by block is shown in the table below.

Block of Bernard	200	300	400	500	TOTAL
# of Participating Businesses	12	7	0	4	23

Despite the short-notice and inherent uncertainty associated with this year's pilot program, the overall feedback from participants was positive. Staff received comment that during the road closure period, the downtown was relatively vibrant, energized and had a positive atmosphere. A summary of a staff survey of businesses in the program indicated that 88% of participants experienced financial results in 2020 that were the same or better than 2019, and the same percentage of participants indicated a willingness to participate in the program again in future years.

Key Survey Results of Participating Businesses	Yes	No/Unsure
Financial results were the same or better than the summer of 2019	88%	12%
Willingness to participate in the program again	88%	12%

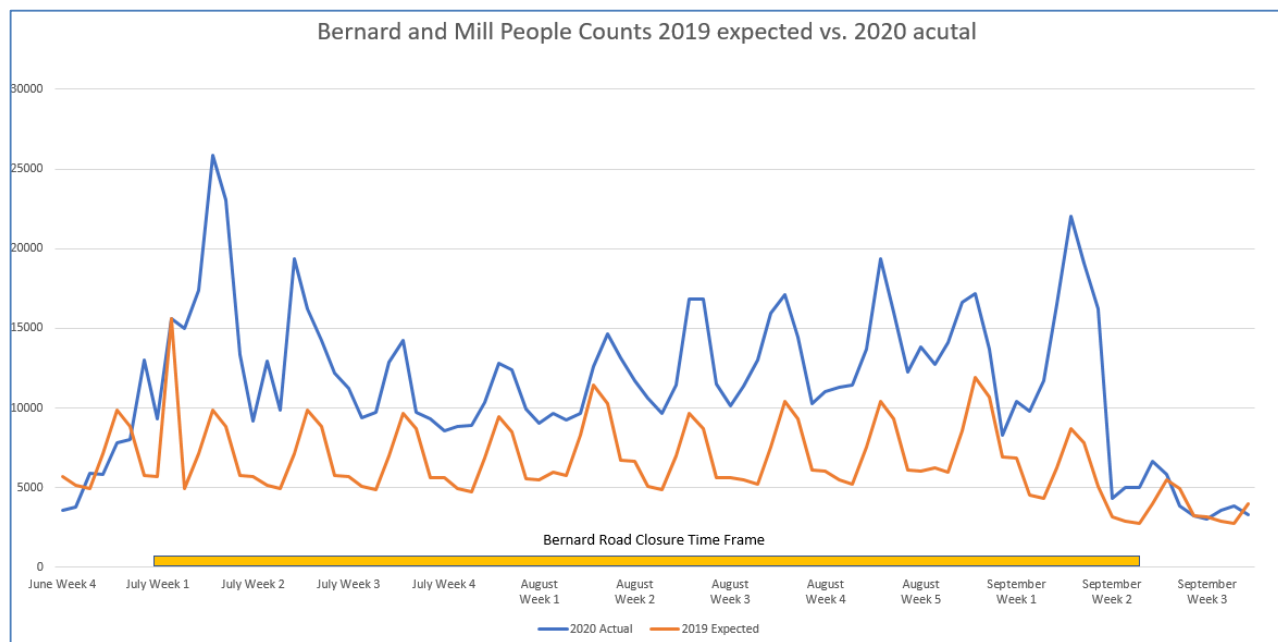
Further to the above, 53% of respondents indicated a desire to see the road closure for a longer period of time, 41% of respondents indicated a desire to see the road closure for the same length of time and 6% indicated a desire to see the closure one weekend a month. Respondents also indicated their preferred extent of the road closure as shown in the table below.

Preferred Extent of Road Closure			
From the Sails:	to Pandosy (2 blocks)	to Ellis (3 blocks)	to St. Paul (4 blocks)
Respondents	41%	35%	24%

Overall, the businesses that participated in the program were very pleased and supported this initiative taking place on an annual basis.

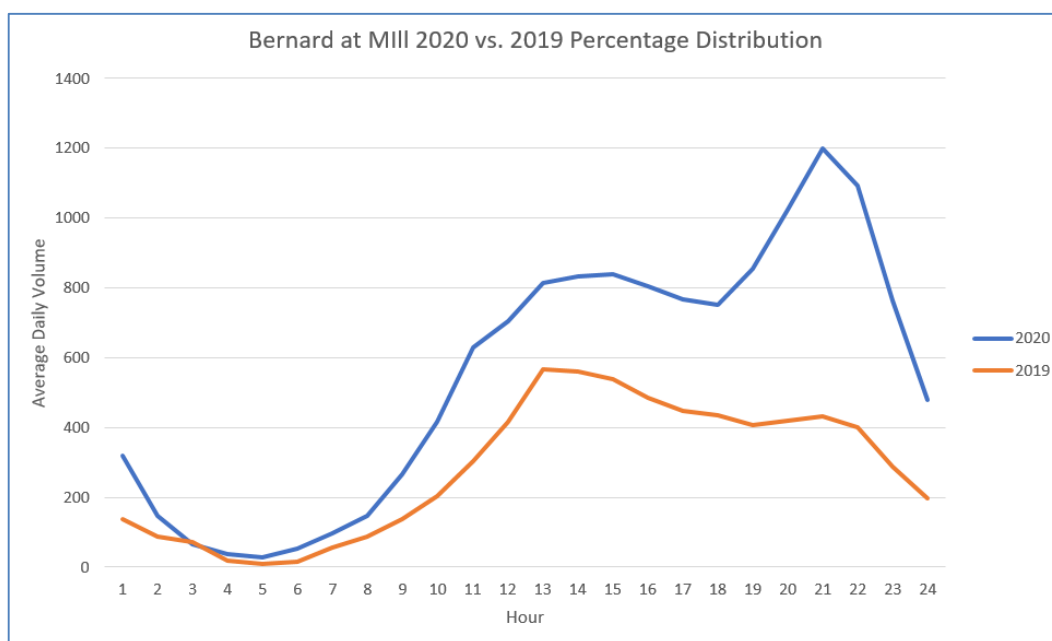
Pedestrian Activity

Nine automated pedestrian counters were placed along the corridor during the summer of 2020. These counters operated 24/7 and captured valuable data to understand patterns of activity on the corridor. The graph below shows that pedestrian counts increased dramatically with the start of the road closure period. Average pedestrian volumes were up by 88% compared to 2019's expected counts at the intersection of Bernard Avenue and Mill Street throughout the closure. Ten percent (10%) of the pedestrian activity on the road closure was comprised of bikes, skateboards and rollerblades.



Graph 1. Bernard and Mill People Counts 2019 expected vs 2020 actual

A combination of the road closure and changes in social habits due to COVID-19 influenced when pedestrians experienced Bernard Avenue. In 2019, the average daily volume peaked at 1pm. This summer, the 2019's peak was achieved two and a half hours earlier (10:30 am) and pedestrian volumes continued to grow until 9:00 pm. There were more people at Bernard and Mill over a longer period of time than historically seen.



Graph 2. Bernard at Mill 2020 vs 2019 Percentage Distribution

Public Life Observation Study

Several Staff participated in a public life study in mid-July and in mid-August between 6:00 pm and 8:00 pm on Saturday evening. The goal of the exercise was to study how the public was using the expanded space.

Key observations from the study were as follows:

- The car-free roadway:
 - Transformed the street into a park-like atmosphere with more people lingering or talking on the street.
 - Encouraged greater utilization of street furniture at corners on Bernard Avenue and highlighted the value of shady areas (e.g. street trees).
 - Created more of a seamless transition between Bernard Avenue and adjacent public spaces (City Park and Kerry Park).
- There was greater utilization of the roadway as a pedestrian thoroughfare on the busier sections of Bernard Avenue toward the sails, indicating the added pedestrian space was necessary for physical distancing.
- People were attracted to areas where there was more animation (e.g. musicians) or activity (e.g. temporary patio areas).

DKA Survey

In mid-September, the Downtown Kelowna Association (the “DKA”) surveyed its membership regarding the Bernard Avenue road closure. The survey included businesses both on Bernard (regardless of whether or not they had participated in the program) and off Bernard. A breakdown of key results for each of these areas is provided below:

Key DKA Survey Results – Members on Bernard	Yes	No	Unsure
Did the closure impact your business in a positive way?	34%	47%	19%
Should the road closure happen again?	84%	16%	
Would you like to see street vendors (if possible due to COVID)?	66%	34%	

Key DKA Survey Results – Members off of Bernard	Yes	No	Unsure
Did the closure impact your business in a positive way?	10%	51%	39%
Should the road closure happen again?	87%		13%
Would you like to see street vendors (if possible due to COVID)?	79%	11%	

As anticipated, the positive impact of the road closure was more significant for businesses on Bernard than businesses off of Bernard. Both groups overwhelmingly indicated a desire to see the closure happen again, with a strong willingness to seeing street vendors animate the road closure area.

The DKAs letter of support with respect to the recommendations in this report is attached as Schedule A.

Community Safety

There were no substantive concerns from a community safety perspective, RCMP and City Bylaws, regarding the road closure this summer.

Tourism Kelowna

Tourism Kelowna was contacted regarding the Bernard Avenue pedestrian zone. Tourism Kelowna indicated that they "received many positive comments about the atmosphere and general feel of the downtown during the closure of Bernard Avenue."

Tourism Kelowna has offered a letter of support (Schedule B) for the City of Kelowna to consider a pedestrian friendly Bernard Avenue program in future years. In the letter they mention the positive comments their staff received while manning the tourism cart on the 400 block of Bernard Avenue in August. Residents and visitors appreciated the opportunity to ask questions, enjoy the music, or speak with business they might not have seen in previous years when Bernard Avenue was open to cars.

Overall, Tourism Kelowna felt that the Bernard Avenue road closure had a positive effect on Downtown Kelowna and would like it to continue in some form or another in future years.

Discussion:

The 2020 Bernard Avenue road closure was precipitated by a response from the need to take innovative action in regard to economic recovery and social distancing. It was planned swiftly and without the full understanding of how COVID-19 would impact the program. Throughout the summer, businesses and the general community were faced with uncertainty regarding how to safely respond to changing government mandates concerning social distancing and the prevention of COVID-19 during the pandemic.

As such, this year's experience was not necessarily reflective of the road closure experience in a non-COVID environment and shouldn't be indicative of the program in future years. That said, key lessons learned this year and outlined below will help guide future planning. A summary of these key lessons is as follows:

Topic:	Lessons Learned:
Traffic Management Plan	A traffic management plan with greater detail needs to be created to ensure adequate signage regarding the road closure, particularly for vehicles coming off of the highway.
Concrete Barricades	The concrete barricades at the active intersections created safety within the pedestrian zone; however, Staff feel that more aesthetically pleasing solutions could be pursued to accomplish similar objectives.
Signage Where Pedestrian Zone Meets Active Intersection.	Maintaining active cross streets is important for the vehicular functionality of the remainder of downtown. Staff feel additional solutions would be warranted to increase pedestrian awareness at active intersections.
Sidewalk and Roadway	With increased pedestrians and takeout food, there is a need for

Cleanliness	additional street and sidewalk cleaning and emptying of garbage cans.
Type of program for road closure should be reflective of businesses on the roadway	The 200 and 300 blocks of Bernard, which contain a significant number of restaurants close together, organically embraced the road closure. The energy and vibrancy felt natural and didn't require extra resources to program the space. The 400 and 500 blocks require additional programming to make the space feel vibrant and lively.
Space in front of retail business may need to be programmed	While businesses will be given priority to the space in front of their brick-and-mortar location, Staff acknowledge that future initiatives should be devised to animate the roadway in front of retail businesses that do not participate in the program.

200 and 300 Block of Bernard Avenue:

Assessment of 2020

Based on the preceding discussion, Staff feel that the 2020 Bernard Avenue road closure pilot experience was proven to be successful for the 200 and 300 blocks of the roadway. With the simple act of closing the roadway and creating a safe zone for businesses and pedestrians, the street was transformed into a public plaza, which became an extension of City Park. Participating business were generally very pleased and support this initiative becoming an annual event.

Recommendation for 2021 and Beyond

Given the success of the program in 2020, Staff's recommendation is to make the closure an annual event overseen by the Active Living and Culture Department (ALC), who will engage the necessary stakeholders regarding the logistics and implementation associated with the road closure. The City's Property Management department would maintain involvement regarding approving and regulating patios as per the regulations of the City's Consolidated Sidewalk Patio Program.

400 and 500 Block of Bernard Avenue:

Assessment of 2020

The 2020 pilot program revealed a number of challenges associated with the closure of Bernard Avenue in the 400 and 500 blocks, largely as a result of the limited number of food and beverage establishments which were critical to the program's success in the 200 and 300 blocks. While the program was intended to provide space for retail establishments to expand and use the roadway, retailer businesses found it difficult to take advantage of this opportunity due to staffing and the additional expenses associated with protecting their merchandise. The trial experience in 2020 suggests that additional programming and animation is required to make the closure of these two blocks vibrant and successful.

Recommendation for 2021

Throughout the world, cities and towns are taking their parks to the streets, as a result of greater constraints in urban environments. COVID-19 has accelerated and emphasized the need for streetscapes and laneways to function beyond the requirements of the automobile. Outdoor movies, social distanced

hockey nights, and outdoor game nights are some examples of activities taken to the street. Through the pandemic, residents are looking with a new perspective to these spaces as social and interactive opportunities.

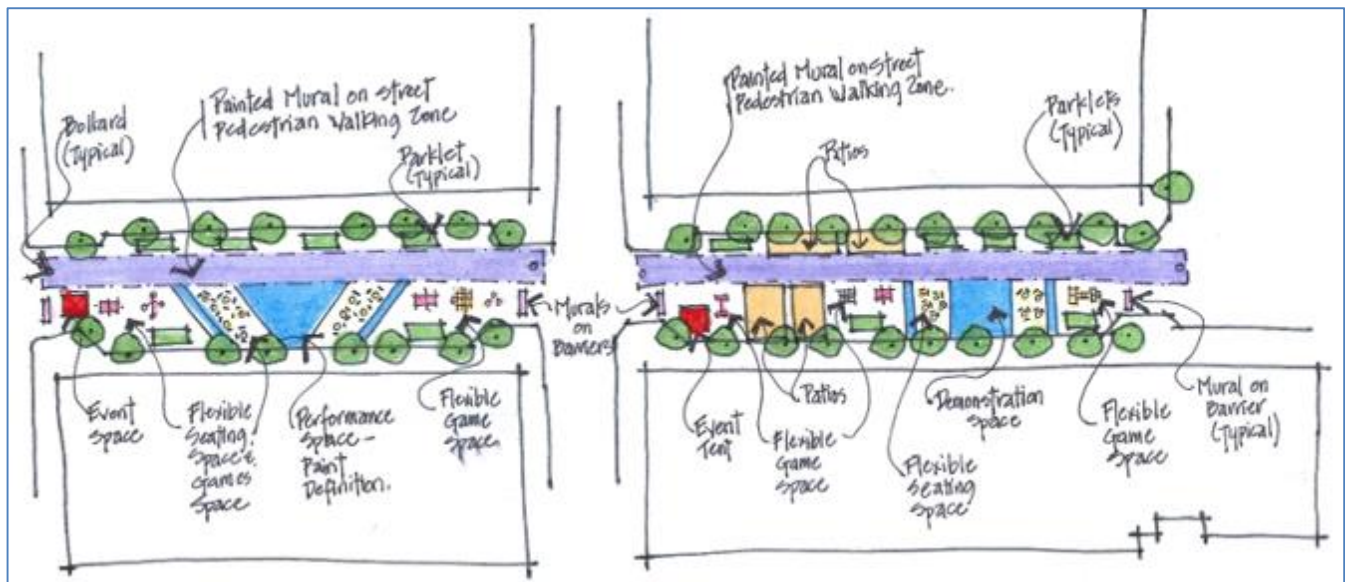
This is a timely change in perspective as we embark towards greater urban density in our City, with a trajectory of less outdoor space per person, and with many residents who will be relying more and more on public outdoor space for recreation. With this increased reliance comes the demand of providing traditional park space at urban land values, and the corresponding challenges therein. In light of these changes, the vehicular closure of Bernard Avenue presents a unique demonstration opportunity to illustrate first-hand how streets can be enjoyed as park space.

Accordingly, Staff propose developing the 400 and 500 blocks of Bernard Avenue as a demonstration "Green Street". The objective would be to design and install physical elements creating an inviting outdoor 'living room'. Such assets may include: parklets, murals, public art, pianos, bike racks, busking stops, etc. Additionally, the City's Outdoor Events team would work with various community stakeholders to animate the roadway and provide COVID compliant programming.

Four distinct components will be considered as part of the proposed Green Street Project:

- Component 1 – provide an opportunity for businesses to expand into the patio space, as was done this year.
- Component 2 – incorporate elements such as parklets¹ and street painting.
- Component 3 – provide flexible games and furniture
- Component 4 – provide additional animation opportunities through designated programming areas.

A high-level concept of the proposed "Green Street" on the 400 and 500 blocks of Bernard Avenue is provided below.



¹ Small pop-up parks, approximately the size of a parking stall, that are publicly available for use.

Financial/Budgetary Considerations:

Staff anticipate total costs associated with a closure of Bernard Avenue – not including the elements associated with the proposed “Green Street” – to be in the range of \$15,000. This includes items such as additional cleaning, waste removal, fencing, planters, additional security, and installation of signage and barriers. As revenue associated with the expanded patio program is in the range of \$15,000, there is no net taxation impact associated with the closure of the 200 and 300 blocks of Bernard Avenue.

With respect to the 400 and 500 blocks, Staff anticipate the “Green Street” to increase the overall costs of the initiative by approximately \$25,000. These additional resources would be used to not only create elements such as the parklets, street painting, street furniture, trees, etc. but also animate the space with unique programming opportunities, crucial to the success of the road closure. It should be noted that Staff believe that a number of the key physical elements associated with the “Green Street” could be funded by sponsorships; accordingly, net costs associated with this initiative may be further reduced.

Conclusion

Main streets and traditional downtowns are at the heart of communities. Our downtown is arguably the heart of Kelowna, a social and commercial hub that serves the City as a whole. Investments in downtown have been shown to drive tourism, community engagement, and civic pride.

While the Bernard Avenue road closure originated as an economic recovery tool, it has evolved into a mechanism to animate and create vibrancy along the main street. The recommendations presented in this report build upon the experience and lessons learned this past summer and are specific to the two distinct sections of the road closure area. The proposed Green Street concept is an innovative and necessary step forward regarding how the public views and interacts with streetscapes. Further, the demonstration project aligns with the Imagine Kelowna’s principles of becoming a collaborative, connected, responsible, and smarter community.

Next steps involve staff convening with key stakeholders to begin the design work for the Green Street space and commence the program planning process. It’s important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic is unpredictable and may impact the 2021 program delivery model. That said, program plans will be developed to align with provincial health guidelines and provide safe and effective animation of the space.

Internal Circulation:

Finance
Community Safety
Transportation
Parking
Partnerships

Considerations not applicable to this report:

Legal/Statutory Authority:
Legal/Statutory Procedural Requirements:
Existing Policy:
External Agency/Public Comments:
Communications Comments:

Submitted by: J. Adamson, Property Management
D. Nicholas, Active Living and Culture
M. Steppuhn, Parks Planning

Approved for inclusion: J. Säufferer, Department Manager, Real Estate Services

Attachments: 1. Schedule A –DKA, Letter of Support
2. Schedule B – Tourism Kelowna, Letter of Support
3. Schedule C – PowerPoint Presentation