

Fresno City Hall clears way for outdoor dining

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Fresno's Tower District is expected to benefit from a change to Fresno's policy on outdoor dining, making it easier for restaurants to offer the service.

A recently approved amendment to Fresno's municipal code allows various food and drink servers to create outdoor dining areas within street easements and rights of ways without having to apply for a site plan or special permit. Instead, an over-the-counter application and approval will speed the process.

The amended code sets forth a standardized plan for food, drink and dessert providers to serve their specialties in an outdoor dining area within certain parameters.

With an abundance of sunshine and fair weather, Fresno is considered an ideal city for outdoor dining facilities. However, restrictions and permit requirements made the idea difficult.

Now, with new regulations set to begin during the first week of April, some of the restrictions have been eased. Restaurant owners are happy with the decision.

"It helps business," said Craig Scharton, former business development director for the City of Fresno and owner of Peeve's Public House & Local Market on the Fulton Mall. "An increasing amount of people can be seated without expanding rent."

Scharton said Fresno has the perfect night climate for outdoor dining. "We have beautiful summer nights, and with a glass of wine, it's the good life."

Scharton said he would apply for outdoor seating.

He said the new amendment could fundamentally change the Fulton Mall. Sidewalks will be wide under plans to reopen the mall to vehicle traffic.

“You can use the sidewalk for dining,” Scharton said.

He said approval of the amendment was one of the most restaurant-friendly moves the city has made in years. “And the vote was unanimous,” Scharton said.

The Fresno City Council vote didn’t get too much attention since it came on the same day as the vote to open the Fulton Mall to traffic.

Mike Shirinian, owner of The Elbow Room in Fig Garden Village, agreed that the city took a good step in allowing for more outdoor dining.

“It’s nice for the customer,” Shirinian said.

He said The Elbow Room has had an outdoor patio for the past 17 years. “It is a key component of the dining experience,” Shirinian said. He added that by providing heaters in the winter and water misters in the summer, his patio area can be utilized year-round.

Shirinian sees increased outdoor dining as a positive addition to Fresno, including the downtown area. It is something that has worked in other downtowns, he said.

“In downtown San Francisco there are lots of tables out front (of restaurants).”

In Fresno, the idea could be widely used.

Besides restaurants, taverns, delicatessens, ice cream stores, cafeterias, banquet halls, bakeries, microbreweries and nightclubs now have the opportunity to seat and serve their guests outdoors. No additional parking is required when the outdoor dining area is less than 749 square feet.

Seating could be placed on the sidewalk as long as pedestrians have four feet to make their way through.

With an over-the-counter permit, the total outdoor dining area will allow as many as 49 people or a seating area of 749 square feet, whichever is less.

Elliott Balch, downtown revitalization manager for the City of Fresno, said the amendment did not come about because of any one restaurant calling for change. Rather, the city realized that the popularity of outdoor dining has grown and it wanted to be more business friendly.

In past years, restaurants had to spend several thousands dollars and obtain special approval each time a restaurant wanted to expand its patio.

Now it will be a much simpler process, Balch said. He said that 80 percent of the applications for outdoor dining are routine cases that really don’t necessitate a special permit requirement.

Bill Kuebler, executive director of the Tower District Marketing Committee, said the Tower District is very conducive to outdoor dining. "We are very much in favor of that," he said.

Kuebler said several restaurants in the Tower District have sidewalk seating that leaves a four-foot clearance for pedestrians.

He said that 20 years ago, outdoor dining was nearly non-existent. But since that time, restaurants have responded to consumer demand for more space to eat out of doors.

Larger outdoor eating areas will still require a more extensive permit process.

Under the amendment, additional outdoor dining area as large as 3,000 square feet may be approved with a site plan review or conditional use permit.

The amendment also states that an outdoor area must be within 20 feet of the restaurant building.

Allowed outdoor furnishings include tables, chairs, umbrellas, landscape pots, wait stations, planters, benches and waste receptacles.

Outdoor alcohol service will have some additional requirements not imposed on the non-alcohol establishments, including an application and security plan. Also the director of the Development and Resource Management has the option of denying the application.

Alcohol-serving locations needed to be roped off. But barriers around other outdoor dining areas are not required. They are allowed if not more than four feet in height and allow for at least one direct exit.