

Yolo County Civil Grand Jury An Investigation of Parklets on Main Street in Woodland



“The road to success is dotted with many tempting parking spaces.” - Will Rogers

SUMMARY

The Yolo County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) completed an investigation of the parklets, small outdoor structures, located on Main Street in Woodland. The investigation focused on the purpose, effectiveness, oversight, and sustainability of the Citywide

Parklet Program, as well as stakeholder experiences with the program. This report was investigated based on a public concern.

ACRONYMS/GLOSSARY

Parklet – A small outdoor structure that converts one or more parking spaces into public seating or dining areas.

Citywide Parklet Program – A City of Woodland initiative allowing businesses to use public parking spaces for outdoor dining.

City Council – The legislative body governing the City of Woodland.

BACKGROUND

During the pandemic, The City of Woodland implemented a Citywide Parklet Program to support local restaurants and cafés by allowing them to expand their outdoor seating into public parking spaces. Eligible businesses can utilize up to two city-owned parking spaces for their parklets, subject to an annual review and a fee of \$500 per parking space. The permit for these parklets was valid until November 1, 2024, unless terminated earlier or extended by the City Council.

To assist small businesses in constructing or enhancing these parklets, the City offers a grant program. Qualifying establishments with a maximum of 20 full-time employees can apply for up to \$20,000 per parklet structure. The total funding available for this initiative is approximately \$125,000, and applications are considered on a first-come, first-served basis until the deadline of July 31 each year.

APPROACH

- Reviewed publicly available documents, including City Council meeting minutes, City of Woodland Parklet Program materials, and city budget reports.

- Interviewed a sample of downtown business owners, city staff, and community members (no individual identified, per PC §929).
- Conducted two site visits to downtown Woodland to inspect current parklet installations.
- Read minutes of City Council meeting on the topic of outdoor business expansions and renewal of the parklet program.

DISCUSSION

1. Program Purpose and Community Impact

- The parklet initiative was initially launched in response to COVID-19 restrictions but has since evolved into a broader economic development tool.
- Several business owners reported increased customer traffic due to expanded seating, especially during warm months.
- Public reaction has been mixed; while some residents enjoy the vibrancy of downtown, others express concern about reduced parking availability and aesthetics.

2. Design and Safety Concerns

- Parklet structures must meet uniform design or safety standards. Some lack sufficient barriers or accessibility features.
- The City has issued general guidelines but has not consistently enforced them.

3. Equity and Access to Grants

- Some small businesses noted challenges in applying for or receiving grants, citing burdensome paperwork or lack of awareness.
- There were reports of disparities in access, with larger or more connected businesses appearing to benefit disproportionately.

4. Oversight and Long-Term Viability

- The City currently conducts annual reviews, but no mid-year checks are required.
- Long-term funding and management responsibilities remain unclear, especially if the grant funds are exhausted.

FINDINGS

F1: The parklet program has provided meaningful economic support to participating businesses on Main Street.

F2: The lack of uniform design and safety standards among parklets poses potential liability risks and detracts from downtown aesthetics.

F3: Smaller and less-resourced businesses may struggle to access grant funding or comply with application requirements.

F4: The current oversight mechanisms are insufficient to ensure ongoing compliance and safety.

F5: Public feedback about reduced parking has not been formally addressed in city planning discussions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1: The City of Woodland should standardize design and safety requirements for all parklets and conduct regular inspections. *(Relates to F2, F4)*

R2: The City should streamline the grant application process and offer technical assistance to ensure equitable access for all small businesses. *(Relates to F3)*

R3: The City Council should consider conducting a public parking impact assessment before renewing or expanding the parklet program. *(Relates to F5)*

R4: The City should establish a mid-year compliance review in addition to the annual review of parklet permits. *(Relates to F4)*

R5: The City should consider extending the grant program or identifying alternative funding sources to support long-term sustainability. *(Relates to F1, F3)*

COMMENDATION

The City of Woodland is to be commended for launching an innovative program that helped local businesses remain open and thrive during challenging economic times.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

From the following individuals:

- City Manager: F1, F2, F3, F4, F5 / R1, R2, R3, R4, R5
- Community Development Director: F2, F3, F4 / R1, R2, R4

From the following governing bodies:

- Woodland City Council: F1, F2, F5 / R1, R3, R5

INVITED RESPONSES

- Economic Development Manager: F3 / R2, R5
- Downtown Business Association Leadership: F1, F3