

# The Progress-Index

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## NEWS

# Petersburg's Old Towne Square will go away; city manager says he will look at options

*There is no time table for removal of the outdoor dining area, city manager Stuart Turille Jr. tells City Council. Even though their permission was not needed, councilors were mixed in reactions.*



**Bill Atkinson**

The Progress-Index

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PETERSBURG — The city will reopen to traffic that portion of North Sycamore Street that now is the pandemic-related Old Towne Square outdoor dining area, but City Manager Stuart Turille Jr. will look at options for a possible new location for the venue out of a public right-of-way.

No time table has been given for the removal of Old Towne Square. Turille told City Council Tuesday afternoon he would advise them in a letter when the street will reopen.

The square was authorized in May 2020 by then-City Manager Aretha Ferrell-Benavides as a way to help restaurants recoup patrons lost to the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The original understanding was that once the pandemic's emergency was lifted, then the street would reopen.

Supporters of the outdoor dining area were pushing for permanent placement on Sycamore between Bank and Bollingbrook streets, saying it was generating pedestrian traffic downtown. Opponents of it, however, were pushing for a different kind of traffic — the vehicular kind that prior to last May were using North Sycamore Street as direct access to the north end of the Old Towne district.

While it is under Turille's authority to remove the square without council permission, he opted to present several options to seek a consensus among the councilors. He eventually got it, but not without some pointed input from some of the local lawmakers.

Turille presented three options to council: keep Old Towne Square as it is, take it down and reopen the road, or reopen the road and look at relocating the square to a vacant lot at the corner of Sycamore and Bollingbrook streets. He provided benefits to each of the options, but in the end recommended the third option. However, some legwork would be needed to determine if the lot could be approved for alcohol consumption.

Turille suggested that the city possibly work with the Chamber of Commerce on designating a monthly event in Old Towne that could use the lot and qualify for special state Alcohol Beverage Control Board approval.

Turille also recommended that the city consider a "comprehensive downtown master plan" where everyone involved could offer input on "a proper downtown square." Petersburg's Main Street Program is working on getting a state grant to help pay for that comprehensive plan, and Turille recommended the city back Main Street's work.

There seemed to be consensus among council that the street should be reopened, but there was a difference of opinion on which option should be pursued.

Ward 4 Councilor Charles Cuthbert, who represents the Old Towne district on council, said he preferred the second option of removing the square and not pursue any alternatives for now.

"I think it's a waste of the taxpayers' money" to pursue relocating the square, Cuthbert told his colleagues.

"Three of the four main beneficiaries already have their own outdoor dining available, and I would not pursue renting that corner," he added. "I don't think we get much bang for the buck."

Ward 1 Councilor Treska Wilson-Smith and Vice Mayor Annette Smith-Lee both chose the third option, commending Turille for all of the research he did and "the professionalism in which he presented," Smith-Lee said. While she preferred keeping the square, Wilson-Smith said Turille "has put a lot of good thought into the process."

Ward 5 Councilor Howard Myers did not want council to get involved with the square's removal since it was not involved in its inception and development. Mayor Samuel Parham, another supporter of the square, said he was "willing to do whatever's beneficial for Ward 4."

Any lease of the corner lot would require council's approval, so Turille said he would come back to council with more information about rental terms.

**No demands:** VDOT: No 'reopen-or-else' ultimatum to Petersburg over future of Old Towne Sycamore Square

**Stay or go:** Petersburg built a place for pandemic dining. Will it still be here in a post-COVID world?

**In the moment:** Phase 1-friendly Old Towne Square receives rave reviews

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## NEWS

# VDOT: No 'reopen-or-else' ultimatum to Petersburg over future of Old Towne Sycamore Square

*In an email to Petersburg's state senator, the agency said the city was told it could lose about \$4,500 of \$6.1 million in annual maintenance payments if North Sycamore Street stretch stayed closed*



**Bill Atkinson**

The Progress-Index

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PETERSBURG — The Virginia Department of Transportation never told Petersburg to reopen Old Towne Sycamore Square to vehicular traffic or risk losing state money that covers maintenance reimbursement for all of Sycamore Street, correspondence between VDOT and a Petersburg-area legislator indicates.

The money that Petersburg stood to lose annually only covered that one-block stretch of North Sycamore Street that was shuttered to vehicular traffic last year, according to an email sent to Sen. Joseph D. Morrissey, D-Petersburg last week. That email, from VDOT director of governance and legislative affairs Jo Anne Maxwell, said the amount of money the city gets annually from VDOT for urban-maintenance projects would be prorated to exclude the portion of Sycamore Street where cars are detoured. Dollar loss would be roughly \$4,505 each year, the email said.

The email comes as Petersburg deliberates the fate of the square, which was created in May 2020 as a way for restaurants in Old Towne to recoup business lost to the COVID-19 pandemic. Forty-two picnic tables line both lanes of the street, bordered by barricades directing traffic around.

It was only supposed to be a temporary measure that would end when the pandemic mandates on social distancing and maximum occupancies in businesses were lifted. The closer we moved toward total re-emergence from the pandemic, the more that Old Towne

Sycamore Square became a thorny issue between supporters who want to make it permanent and opponents who want North Sycamore reopened between Bank and Bollingbrook streets.

## **No mandate from VDOT**

"VDOT is not requiring that the relevant portion of Sycamore Street be reopened but has notified the City of Petersburg that it must be open to vehicular traffic in order for Petersburg to receive maintenance payments for that portion of the road," Maxwell wrote in the email, a copy of which Morrissey's office gave to The Progress-Index. "VDOT has advised that Petersburg may either opt to open the portion of the road that has been closed to traffic in order to receive maintenance payments for said portion, or the city could opt to keep the portion of the road closed in which case the city's maintenance payments would be reduced by an amount attributable to the portion of the road that is closed to vehicles."

Reached by phone Tuesday morning, Maxwell confirmed she sent the email. She said she was responding to a query from Morrissey about whether or not VDOT had officially told Petersburg to reopen the road.

According to Virginia Code Section 33.2-319, urban-maintenance payments shall be based "on the number of moving-lane-miles of highways or portions thereof available to peak-hour traffic in that locality." In short, if a city street or any portion of it is closed to vehicular traffic, then the city loses money based on the distance of the closure.

Maxwell said the amount quoted in her email was based on two-tenths of a mile of North Sycamore Street, but that still has to be finalized.

In fiscal year 2021, a VDOT spokeswoman said, Petersburg was set to receive around \$6.1 million in maintenance payments from the state based on more than 396 "lane miles" of primary and secondary streets within the city limits.

## **Open or close?**

As Petersburg inched closer to pre-pandemic normalcy, battle lines began to be drawn over the fate of the square.

"If it was run properly, it would be perfect for Petersburg," said David "DJ" Payne, who owns two restaurants that border the square.

Sergei Troubetzkoy, a former Petersburg tourism official who returned to the city to helm the reboot of Main Street Petersburg, said his board has not taken an official position on the square's future. Personally, he said, he is not in favor of keeping Old Towne Sycamore Square where it is because it interrupts vital visitor traffic flow into the rest of the region.

"When tourists get to [the square], they think it's the end of the street," Troubetzkoy said. "They don't know there's stuff beyond it."

**Stay or go:** Petersburg built a place for pandemic dining. Will it still be here in a post-COVID world?

**Open for business:** Phase 1-friendly Old Towne Square receives rave reviews

As it currently stands, motorists on North Sycamore Street are detoured around the square. Northbound drivers turn either left or right on Bank Street and are routed a street over and must make several turns to get back to the riverfront area of Old Towne. Southbound motorists have to turn left on Bollingbrook Street toward Adams Street and then back onto Bank Street to get back to Sycamore.

An invitation-only meeting organized by one of the Old Towne business owners was held Monday afternoon, moved from the square itself into adjacent Longstreet's Deli due to the heat. In attendance at the meeting were Morrissey and Petersburg Mayor Sam Parham, the latter of whom supports keeping Old Towne Sycamore Square but said he will accept whatever becomes of it. The meeting was comprised mostly of backers of the square; Troubetzkoy attended, but only after running into Morrissey prior to the meeting and joining at Morrissey's request.

The Progress-Index did not find out about the meeting until after it was held.

## What about alternatives?

There are several wide-open places off-street surrounding Old Towne Sycamore Square, in front of Dixie Restaurant at the corner of Sycamore and Bank, and the site of the former Master Chevrolet automobile dealership bordered by Bank, Bollingbrook and Adams streets. All of that land, however, is owned by the estate of former Master Chevrolet owner Albert Suttle, according to city records. Moving to those spots would require some sort of agreement between the estate and Old Towne Sycamore Square backers.

Payne is not in favor of that. The current location, especially on visitor-friendly Friday and Saturday nights when bands often perform on the square's flatbed trailer stage, "breathes life,

into Old Towne," he said.

Troubetzkoy said the Petersburg Area Art League's Art Park on Old Street, with its permanent stage, would be an ideal place to relocate the square's entertainment venue.

"I supported it as a COVID response, but that is all it was supposed to be," he said.

City Council has a work session next Tuesday, and Parham said he expects the square's future to be discussed at that time.

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## NEWS

# Staunton says dining area cited by Old Towne Square supporters will never become permanent

*Staunton's Beverley Street will never close year-round for outdoor eating, entertainment venue for the same reasons Petersburg won't allow its square to be full-time: lack of service, emergency access*



**Bill Atkinson**

The Progress-Index

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PETERSBURG — Supporters fighting the dismantling of Old Towne Square have repeatedly mentioned Staunton as a prime example of how a city has successfully closed off a downtown right-of-way to allow outdoor dining and entertainment.

And while there are similarities between the projects — both were born from economic necessity due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, for one — Staunton's Beverley Street is not permanently shut down to vehicular traffic, and its closure is driven by both days of the week and seasons of the year.

**More:** Petersburg's Old Towne Square will go away; city manager says he will look at options

According to one Staunton official, that is how it will stay. Why? For the same reason that Petersburg City Manager Stuart Turille Jr. cited in his July 20 decision to take Old Towne Square down and reopen North Sycamore Street to vehicular traffic.

It's all about access.

"Beverley Street does not have any alleys or service access areas that would accommodate trash collection, material delivery, emergency service access or utility routing," Michelle Bixler, Staunton's public information officer, wrote in an email to The Progress-Index.

"Without the ability to provide essential services, it's just a non-starter."

Neither does the one-block stretch of North Sycamore Street, which Petersburg's square currently occupies. Access from Bank Street to the rest of Old Towne would require the existing barricades be moved to allow emergency vehicles to get through should the need arise. While square supporters have pointed to that as a selling tool, Turille estimated in his report that would not be practically feasible.

## **Staunton's approach**

The outdoor dining area in this Shenandoah Valley city of 24,400 located 130 miles northwest of Petersburg was created by Staunton City Manager Steve Rosenberg in June 2020 as a pandemic panacea for the corridor's restaurants hard-hit by the lack of indoor dining. It consists of a four-block stretch of Beverley Street between Lewis and Market streets.

At first, the closure was only on weekends between June and September 2020, but demand for it was so strong that the closures were extended on weekends through December 2020. This year's schedule saw the closures begin in April and will last through October, with operating hours of 4 p.m. Fridays through 7:30 a.m. Mondays.

Several downtown streets intersect Beverley Street through the area, but the city uses bollards — posts normally connected by chains to set boundaries — to allow motor traffic to continue on those cross streets while Beverley is closed. Bixler said city crews placed openings on Beverley at the intersections on which the bollards are attached when the dining area is open.

Bixler said the city issued a blanket permit for all the restaurants and one brewery in that section to use the space for dining. Staunton takes care of the routine maintenance of the area, but the businesses are responsible for litter removal.

Since the closures are seasonal, the city is not losing any state reimbursement for right-of-way maintenance for Beverley Street.

According to the Virginia Department of Transportation, the city of Petersburg lost about \$4,500 of the \$6.1 million it received from the state last year for road reimbursement.

## **Old Towne Square's future**

According to a letter Turille's office sent to Old Towne businesses, city crews will remove the barriers and outdoor dining tables Aug. 9. Originally, the 42 tables in the square were

purchased and placed by former restaurant owners, but the city reimbursed them for the costs and now own the tables.

Old Towne Square was approved by then-City Manager Aretha Ferrell-Benavides as part of her authority to act on the city's behalf under emergency situations. The city issued a temporary right-of-way abandonment for North Sycamore Street but maintained ownership of the road throughout. It opened in May 2020.

The understanding was that once the COVID-19 state of emergency was lifted, the square would be removed. The barricade at Bollingbrook Street would be moved to accommodate transactions at the non-restaurant businesses in the immediate vicinity of the square.

However, as time went by, its organizers began adding things to the venue to make it more attractive, such as a flatbed stage for bands. As the emergency gradually started to lift, these supporters pushed city council to consider making the square a permanent fixture. While councilors had opinions on both sides of the square argument, city council ultimately left the decision to reopen Sycamore up to Turille since that power falls under his job duties.

Turille originally presented three options, two of them involving reopening of Sycamore Street. He ultimately chose to reopen Sycamore, but work with city business groups to develop a downtown/Old Towne master plan that could incorporate off-street pedestrian access to outdoor dining.

That angered many of the supporters who claim Turille has not been on the job long enough (his first day was in July) to be able to make such a calculation. They also were upset that city council did not try to reverse Turille's decision, but when he presented those three options for council advice, not one councilor publicly stated a desire to keep Sycamore Street closed.

A Facebook page called "Save Old Towne Square" was started, and the group began promoting a "Save The Square" event for 5 to 9 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 7 inviting people and vendors to come out and protest council inaction. However, according to Petersburg city code, any such event could be a violation of municipal code because no one representing Old Towne businesses filed an application for the mandatory special-use permit in order to run the event.

### **Other news:**

**Who's responsible?:** Event to 'Save the Square' is Saturday in Petersburg, but no one knows who's behind it

**Who's driving?:** Traffic Stats: What areas of Colonial Heights experience the most car accidents?

**Library open by appointment only:** Petersburg bookworms will be happy to know they can access the stacks

**Sutherland couple adopts miracle dog:** Phoenix rises from the 'Maitland Massacre'

**Shave and a haircut:** Sheffield Barbers says it is offering 'fair wages' amid an ongoing strike at its Fort Lee shops

**License:** The Richmond Planet Plate project uplifts the former Black newspaper through license plates

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