

Common Council President José G. Pérez is currently leading an effort to fundamentally change the way parklets and sidewalk cafés get the green light. The proposal? Moving these installations out of the realm of "street encroachments" and folding them into Milwaukee's formal licensing system.

Why the Change?

Currently, Milwaukee oversees roughly 82 sidewalk cafés and 22 parklets or Active Streets installations. Historically, approvals for these spaces have been handled through various Department of Public Works (DPW) processes. As noted in recent Public Works Committee minutes, this has led to a landscape that can feel inconsistent from one block to the next.

Council President Pérez and other city officials are pushing for a more standardized approach. By treating parklets as an "extension of premises" under the city's licensing division, the city aims to create a uniform set of rules for everyone.

What Does This Mean for Neighbors?

For residents living near popular dining corridors, this proposed change is a potential game-changer. Currently, the process for establishing a parklet can be opaque. Shifting to a licensing model would tie these applications to the city's existing system, which includes:

- **Formal Notifications:** Neighbors would be alerted more clearly when a business applies for an outdoor space.
- **A Public Voice:** The licensing process provides a structured path for nearby residents to offer input, whether they want to cheer on a new community space or raise valid concerns about noise or traffic.
- **Accountability:** Licensing allows the city to attach uniform conditions regarding maintenance, insurance, and compliance, making it easier to hold operators accountable if issues arise.

What Does This Mean for Business Owners?

For local restaurants and bars, this shift could be a double-edged sword. On one hand, moving toward a licensing model could lead to more stable, long-term permissions for outdoor seating—moving beyond the uncertainty of one-off annual permits.

On the other hand, it likely signals an increase in red tape. Business owners will still need to provide detailed, dimensioned site plans, prove ADA compliance, and outline safety measures like hazard markers and wheel stops. Coupling these requirements with the formal licensing process could potentially slow down the seasonal rollout for restaurants eager to open their patios as soon as the weather warms up.

What's Next?

At the May 20th Public Works Committee meeting, members voted to "place the communication on file." While that might sound like the end of the road, it actually means the concept is firmly in the council's work queue. City staff and aldermen are now tasked with drafting the specific ordinance language and determining the logistical details.

There is no firm deadline yet, but one thing is clear: Milwaukee is entering a new chapter for its curbside dining scene. Whether you are a business owner planning for next summer or a neighbor curious about your block, this is a development worth watching.

As the city works to balance the vibrancy of these outdoor spaces with the predictability of neighborhood standards, we'll be keeping a close eye on the Council's next steps. Stay tuned—the future of Milwaukee's sidewalks is being written right now.