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Surviving the Winter: Helping NYC's Small Businesses in the Months Ahead

Open streets and outdoor dining gave the city's small firms a lifeline, but with just a few weeks left until winter, it's time for the city and state to step in with new set of creative solutions to give shops and restaurants a crucial boost. CUF asked over twenty city leaders and experts for ideas and insights on how policymakers can help sustain restaurants and other small businesses through the colder months.

by Jonathan Bowles, Eric Krebs, and Emily Eget

When New York City became the epicenter of the novel coronavirus in late March, the city's small businesses ecosystem—and the livelihoods of its workers and owners alike—endured hardships unrivalled in the city's history. City, state, and federal financial assistance undoubtedly helped some businesses, but one creative policy solution did more than anything else to give the city's small firms a lifeline: opening streets and sidewalks for outdoor dining. But with only a few weeks left of mild weather, it's time for city and state policymakers to step in with a new set of creative solutions—policies and initiatives that give New York's restaurants, shops and nightlife venues a crucial boost through the many cold months ahead.

To get a better sense of what should be done to sustain restaurants and other small businesses through the winter, we asked architects, tech experts, restaurateurs, planners, small business experts, and community leaders for concrete ideas for how city and state policymakers could help small businesses survive the fall and winter.

This report features their ideas. It includes creative policy recommendations from more than twenty experts, including architects Vishaan Chakrabarti of PAU, Claire Weisz of WXY, Jing Liu of SO-IL, and Donald Clinton of Cooper Robertson; urban retail pioneers including Queens Night Market founder John Wang, TurnStyle market creator Susan Fine, and Stone Street pioneer Carl Weisbrod; technology experts like Andrew Rasiej of Civic Hall; and small business experts such as Kenneth Mbonu of Flatbush-Nostrand Junction BID, Andrew Rigie of the NYC Hospitality Alliance, Wellington Chen of Chinatown BID; and Yanki Tshering of the Business Center for New Americans.

All together, we received more than 40 concrete ideas grouped into five main areas;

- Design, build, and install winterized outdoor space for restaurants and retailers
- Rethink rules, regulations, and permitting around sidewalks, streets, and public space.
- Enlist New York business, design, and tech talent to help small businesses
- Provide microgrants and technical assistance to aid the transition to pop-up, online, and outdoor operations
- Tap vacant storefronts for land swaps, pop-ups, social infrastructure, and more

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The following are brief descriptions of the ideas we received:

Vishaan Chakrabarti
Founder of Practice for Architecture and Urbanism (PAU)
Former Manhattan director of the New York Department of City Planning

Use scaffolding materials to help a range of restaurants quickly erect winter structures that trap in heat
Outdoor heaters by themselves will not do enough to keep diners warm this winter, but proper enclosures can help trap the heat and prevent it from dissipating. Though some restaurants have already built such structures for the winter, the city can help far more small businesses do so by using sidewalk scaffolding materials to quickly put up cube-like structures. The structure provided by rapid-assembly, scaffolding-style tent enclosures could be built out with a plastic membrane overhead cover and side covers that roll down on at least three sides, trapping the heat within the dining area.

Fill empty storefronts with social infrastructure on a temporary basis to revive street life
The city is full of empty storefronts. If you have a block full of vacant spaces and just one or two restaurants, it's going to feel really desolate and discourage people from coming to the few businesses still open. Activity begets activity, so let's find ways to inhabit empty storefront space with different forms of social infrastructure. The city could get into short-term leases for testing centers, additional classroom space, or vocational training, bringing life and energy back to the streets and helping local businesses in the process.

Susan Fine
Principal
Turnstyle Market

Use LinkNYC terminals to promote nearby businesses
With far fewer corporations taking ads on LinkNYC in this economic crisis, city officials should make use of these terminals to promote nearby restaurants and stores. Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) could help connect their merchants with the MTA or LinkNYC and assist with microtargeting so that there's locally relevant advertising in neighborhoods across the five boroughs. Similarly, the MTA should make use of unused ad spaces in subway stations to promote local area businesses.

Donald Clinton
Partner
Cooper Robertson

Create winterized structures for multiple restaurants on a block to share

Larger winter-ready temporary structures located on designated “Open Streets” could allow several restaurants on a street to share space, creating a lively and dynamic social environment. In the more-open structures, there would be natural ventilation and portable electric radiant heaters. In structures with full enclosure, forced-air heat and ventilation provided by mobile equipment would provide heat and COVID-safe filtered air. Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) could coordinate the capital work to erect the tents, provide for heat and ventilation, and create temporary power connections. This could be at least partially funded by modest space rental payments by participating restaurants. The tents would occupy the roadbed, leaving sidewalks clear, as well leaving one lane along one of the curbs for service vehicles, sanitation trucks, bikes, and emergency vehicles.

John Wang
Founder
Queens Night Market

Give restaurants business opportunities by contracting with them to provide food to shelters and food pantries
To give small businesses more chances to earn revenue in this challenging environment, government agencies should make it a priority to contract with local restaurants to provide food to shelters and food kitchens. This process needs to be transparent and efficient, reducing opportunities for favoritism or price-gouging by restaurants. The city could decentralize the award process to more local stakeholders such as chambers of commerce and BIDs, such that a restaurant within a few blocks of a shelter should be getting the contract to service the shelter.

Yong Zhao & Nicky Chang
Founder/CEO, Head of Design & Strategy
Junzi

Plan winter markets and outdoor food festivals
Most restaurants will not attempt to have outdoor seating in the winter months, but the city can create money-making opportunities for a larger group of restaurants by developing winter markets and food festivals in different neighborhoods. It should be possible to make this work with social distancing. Participation from local restaurants should be encouraged with low or no participation fee.

Claire Weisz
Founding Principal
WXY Studio

Make it simple for small businesses to put up awnings
The city should have an awnings program. Awnings create sheltered areas around so that businesses can continue to operate regardless of snow or rain. But right now, the awnings and signs you see require yearly payments and a big permitting system. By working with awning companies to develop a program with a quick and easy permitting process and a set fee to install canvas awnings on building facades, the city can make it easier for local small businesses to install protected outdoor space while creating opportunities for NYC awning and sign companies, too.

Help hurting small businesses get customers back by expanding bikeways and shared streets
Small businesses need customers, and the key drivers to get New Yorkers back into commercial districts, especially in

Manhattan, are public transit and access to safe bike and walking routes. The city should make it easier for people to get around safely. So why not immediately create bike lanes on the lower level of the Brooklyn Bridge? DOT can do that in two weeks. Then, take half the streets in the Financial District, remove street-level parking, and make them shared streets, with one lane of moving traffic and drop-off zones. These kinds of shared streets will make the city more livable and allow businesses to use the public realm and. People are glowing about areas with closed streets, but there are vast parts of city where nothing has changed. Greatly expanding shared streets and eliminating surface parking in certain areas will make streets more appealing for pedestrians and thus more appealing for small businesses.

Tim Tompkins
President
Times Square Alliance

Incentivize landlords to temporarily "lend" vacant storefront spaces to adjacent businesses
Sadly, there are vacant storefronts in every neighborhood. The city can help make these spaces temporarily available to adjacent retail and restaurant entities so they accommodate more customers under social distancing rules by incentivizing landlords to "lend" their vacant spaces for a limited time. Doing so would help businesses that need extra space, and help the landlord fill vacant space. The city should institute a 150 percent current or future tax credit to the landlord "lending" the space, meaning that a landlord would receive a 45-day-value tax credit for a 30-day lease. In order to facilitate transactions, the city should work with a landlord group to develop a template for a temporary sublease that addresses the kinds of standard concerns that come up about liability, electricity use, and insurance. Need be, the city could facilitate a standard insurance waiver or coverage.

Commission NYC architects to design winter-ready curbside retail and restaurants spaces
When curbside dining was allowed, thousands of planters and barricades sprung up, and some were a beauty, some were a beast. Get ahead of the game and get some better looking prototypes (or kits for adapting what's been out there), and in the process get some money in the hands of designers, furniture makers, and craftspeople who can mobilize quickly.

Issue an emergency contract to pay for winter-ready spaces at scale
Use the City's emergency contract powers, linked to "requirements" contracts, to contract a handful of suppliers to help pay for production or materials on a large scale, and get winter-ready curbside spaces done fast.

Kenneth Mbonu
Executive Director
Flatbush-Nostrand Junction BID

Provide microgrants that enable restaurants in lower-income neighborhoods afford to buy heaters and put up winterized dining structures
Quite a few businesses in our area did not participate in the outdoor dining program, primarily because they could not afford to build the necessary infrastructure. Now with outdoor heating, I'm not sure many of our micro-businesses are financially able to participate. The city can help by providing microgrants and other assistance to entrepreneurs in lower income communities to help defray the costs of heaters, winterizing, and other outdoor dining expenses.

Enlist local artists, designers, and technologists
Local artists and designers can help local businesses create apps to leverage businesses' unique assets and generate

revenue via mobile technology. Many of small businesses are hesitant to embrace technology, and local talent can help.

Larisa Oritz & Jay Coldren
Director of Research and Analysis & Director of Eat + Drink
Streetsense

Help more small businesses transition to e-commerce
Help small businesses with limited resources pivot towards multi-modal and online sales. This should include access to one-on-one technical assistance that will help them begin by optimizing their online profiles and support software that enables easy online sales.

Develop rigorous safety guidance to restore confidence and protect diners and restaurants
The industry needs municipalities to formalize safe indoor dining practices that include physical barriers, adjacent seating, service requirements, restroom procedures and guest flow, not just an arbitrary percentage of seating capacity. The city should then hold businesses accountable for meeting these guidelines to give the public confidence that going out, at least during the pandemic, is as minimally risky as possible. The restaurant industry also needs legislation protecting it from spurious lawsuits from people who contract the virus.

Carl Weisbrod
Senior Advisor at HR&A Advisors
Former Chairman of the New York City Planning Commission

Make permanent zoning, licensing & building code changes needed to allow outdoor dining over the long term
As outdoor dining is extended and made permanent, there really is a need to reconsider how zoning, licensing, and the building code shape our streets. So far, there has just been a temporary waiver of certain existing laws and requirements. But to make outdoor dining permanent, the city can't just make this waiver permanent—all the uses of streets and sidewalks are going to have to be reconsidered. For example, the city should reconsider the rule that prevents storekeepers from selling goods more than three feet into the street/sidewalk, but it needs to be done in a way that doesn't block pedestrians. To that end, there ought to be a regulatory commission that looks at whole structure, particularly for small businesses and for sidewalk usage. And this commission should put forth changes to the regulations and present them to the mayor and city council on an up or down vote. This way, the changes couldn't be diluted or tampered with, and the process won't be slowed down.

Andrew Rasiej
Founder and CEO
Civic Hall

Stop surprise inspections of restaurants
For the time being, let's stop the surprises and let restaurants know in advance or at least schedule the inspections theyneed to maintain with city departments of Health, Consumer Affairs, Buildings, and the Fire Department. This is policy shift that could be easily implemented and would remove the gotcha that normally plays out in the city's restaurant and bar scene at a time when restaurants are dealing with new challenges. Make it more predictable. You get your car inspected on schedule,

why not your restaurant?

Help nightlife survive by allowing ticketed eventsat 25% capacity, and suspending the ban on liquor company-sponsored events

Like it has done for indoor dining, the state should allow nightlife venues to hold performances at 25 percent capacity. There are many venues that could do limited-capacity, seated cultural performances in a controlled safe environment if they were allowed. It should also end the prohibition-era ban on liquor companies sponsoring concerts, which would give venues an important opportunity to add revenues—since no venue is going to break even at just 25 percent capacity.

Launch a winter shelter architecture competition

These days it seems like everything in New York City is built with string lights and plywood. But there may be novel solutions to outdoor dining in the winter months that restaurants aren't going to come up with on their own. The city should create a design competition to challenge the city's architectural community to come up with CDC-compliant outdoor seating designs that can survive the winter.

Allow retail shops to sell goods outdoors

Open streets should be expanded to include retail shops. They city already allows vendors to sell scarves and hats off sidewalk tables—Gift stores and other retailers should be able to do the same and open up tables and sell off the street, beyond the immediate few feet next to their door. To make for a vibrant outdoor culture, the city should broaden its thinking beyond just restaurants.

Create food truck markets

The Union Square Greenmarket is open Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday year-round. Why not invite food truck operators to park their trucks in the square on the days when the Greenmarket isn't happening? Food truck markets could be expanded to other parts of the city, such as Bryant Park, too.

Jing Liu
Principal
SO-IL

Temporarily interiorize select streets

I would like to suggest temporarily interiorizing selected streets in each neighborhood. The Open Restaurant program helped some restaurants who had resources, but not so much for others on shoestring budgets. It also puts a lot of responsibility on the businesses themselves. In the winter, the investment will only be bigger if we want to continue to expand the urban life onto the streets. I would like to see a combination of simple greenhouse construction and street closure program to make some streets into temporary arcades like in many European and Australian cities.

Andrew Rigie
Executive Director
NYC Hospitality Alliance

Change rules that greatly limit outdoor heater options for restaurants

The city should couple the extension of outdoor dining with the ability to use more types of outdoor heaters. Currently, restaurants are only allowed to use hardline, natural gas heaters which require an expensive, time-consuming permitting

process. The city should enable restaurants to use portable propane heaters in a safe manner. Electric heaters are an option, but most restaurants would have to upgrade their electric panels to use them. Electric heating is expensive, so it would be helpful for the government to reduce electricity fees and provide financial support to purchase and install heating systems.

Establish rigid safety measures to prevent COVID outbreaks linked to indoor dining
In the winter, safety compliance is going to be very important—not only for restaurants but also for customers. Bringingdiners back inside of restaurants is going to require conveying a level of comfort and safety through both restaurant protocols and customer best practices. For instance, customers should wear masks while they're sitting down and only remove their mask when they are eating or drinking, putting their mask on when their server comes to the table to take their order or to drop off food and drink.

Encourage office workers to start eating out again
When workers do report back to the office, the cafes, restaurants, and other small businesses they used to frequent on their commute and in the neighborhood will still be there, and in need of their help. It would be nice to see the government incentivize office workers to support these local businesses.

Joyce Moy
Executive Director
CUNY's Asian American/Asian Research Institute

Create community loan funds that help struggling businesses purchase equipment for winter dining
Local Development Corporations (LDCs), BIDs, merchants associations, chambers of commerce should organize to spearhead and act as a hub to a loan fund to help local restaurants and retail stores to lease or buy equipment to extend outdoor dining in cold months, including sturdy tent structures, heating lamps, and canopies. The city could mobilize through the Mayor's Fund or other vehicles to raise money to guarantee a portion of the financing companies' loans as an incentive to lenders.

Help more mom-and-pop's go online by tapping MBA students & pro-bono professional talent
We should organize MBA students, volunteer marketing, digital, and design professionals to assist mom and pop small businesses to get online and manage a virtual form of business.

Pair cultural institutions and celebrities with restaurants to create a virtual experience
Create online pay-per-view packages that include a "backstage visit" with stars via video chat after the performance. The stars recommend their favorite restaurants or meals. The "attendees" can order the performer's favorite meal—or from their favorite menu—to be delivered before the chat so that during the virtual backstage visit, the performers and attendees can share a meal or include a gift certificate from the restaurant. The package could include autographed photos, signed programs or menus, or other promotional incentives to be delivered with meals or gift certificates. The same approach could be used for celebrity fundraisers for local non-profit performing arts organizations, tied to celebrity virtual guided tours of museum exhibits, or neighborhoods like Chinatown, Little Italy, Koreatown, etc. where meals would be from those featured neighborhoods.

Jessica Lappin & Joshua Nachowitz
President & Senior Vice President of Research and Economic Development
Alliance for Downtown New York

Launch partnership programs between office businesses and area small businesses
Office businesses could work with BIDs to generate lists of small non-chain businesses and provide workers with some small credit if they dine out once a week. It could be either a flat dollar amount or a percentage of one meal up to a certain amount. This could work particularly well with larger private employers that typically have staff cafeterias, but which now are closed due to COVID.

Relax regulations that prevent restaurants from expanding into their neighbor's outdoor space
Service-level agreements (SLAs) should be encouraged to allow restaurant owners to expand into adjacent vacant storefronts, across the street, or around a corner if that actually works better for the street environment. Requirements that all alcoholic beverages be served with substantial food should also be relaxed or reinterpreted.

Set up one-stop permitting to fast-track preparations for winter dining
The city should create a one-stop permitting center for restaurant owners to apply for licenses for heaters, necessary FDNY certifications, and approvals for tents and other temporary shelters.

Ofer Cohen
Founder and President
TerraCRG

Help smaller restaurants develop pod-like, winter dining spaces
Some restaurants are already creating secluded spaces that block the wind and give a sense of privacy. These little, open-topped pod enclosures also encourage social distancing. The city or state should help smaller restaurants come up with better structures and heat lamps.

Expand outdoor operations into vacant spaces and parks
Restauranteurs and restaurant workers may need to be less tied to their current physical space, and instead think about how they could thrive in spaces outside, in a pop-up environment, regardless of where the actual physical restaurant is located. For instance, you could take a portion of Brooklyn Bridge Park and make it kind of like a big tent. Online delivery orders could be cooked in other locations, both for delivery and off-site outdoor dining. Dining shouldn't have to limited to right in front of the restaurant.

Matthew Clarke
Executive Director
Design Trust

“Warm Streets” to continue “Open Streets”

“Warm Streets” would be a combination of the Open Streets and Open Restaurants programs, which have offered small businesses a lifeline and community members the opportunity to access these public spaces. Similar to “cool streets” which utilize various cooling options to combat heat-burdened parts of NYC, an approach towards “warm streets” could provide heating options in the forms of awnings, heating lamps, and non-metal seating options.

Emphasize winter cultural activities and experiences

Many winter cities have already begun rethinking their winter months and investing in that period of time just as they would invest in the summer months—by creating new cultural and arts activities. The projects might include working with local artists to design light installations near business corridors to encourage people to walk in those areas as we begin to lose sunlight. Ultimately, these initiatives can provide winter outdoor experiences that support small businesses throughout the winter months ahead.

Provide micro-grants to community organizations and businesses

There needs to be an emphasis on investing, allocating or increasing funding in the form of micro-grants to community organizations and businesses to create placemaking projects in these streets and assist in maintaining them. Providing funding to these mostly volunteer-run local organizations would increase their capacity, allowing them to be able to steward these streets throughout the winter and beyond.

Deborah Marton

Executive Director
Van Alen Institute

Allow for land swaps and pop-ups throughout a neighborhood

Small businesses and restaurants that had the desire and resources to move out into the public realm this summer were often prevented from doing so by things like fire hydrants or bus stops in front of their location. By looking at the neighborhood scale for land swap opportunities, restaurants could move into or in front of the vacancy next door or nearby.

Embed designers and experts in under-resourced communities

Anyone can use milk crates to build a restaurant barrier, but people might be concerned about, whether they're running askance of DOC regulations, whether they're implementing the Department of Health distancing guidelines appropriately, or whether they have proper signage. The real barrier isn't that people don't understand how to put up a restaurant street barrier, it’s that they don't understand the comprehensive regulatory and financial barriers, and design partners embedded in the community can help.

Bridge digital and language divides to realize recommendations

Communities that either don't have English skills or regular broadband access often cannot directly access design recommendations. That’s why having someone embedded in the communities, and connected to leaders of the community-based organizations is so important.

Andrew Manshel

Author of Lessons from Bryant Park*, land-use expert*

Light up commercial corridors

The most depressing thing about winter in New York is that it's dark. There is no shortage of lighting designers out of work in New York. Partnering with DOT and Con Edison, the city should hire designers to light up commercial corridors in beautiful and attractive ways. The more creative and innovative, the better. Heterogeneity encourages travel within the city, and the longer people stay outside, the more money they spend.

Wellington Chen
President
Chinatown BID

Lift the signage moratorium in Chinatown to give neighborhood merchants a marketing boost
Chinatown is home to 3,000 businesses and 20,000 residents. Without foot traffic from office workers and tourists, there simply isn't enough volume to sustain business. One thing the city could do is lift the moratorium on signage on Canal Street. Thousands of signs and thousands of lights are the essence of any Asian market — be it in Osaka, Tokyo, Bangkok — and cheap publicity would go a long way to attract foot traffic. This simple change would allow Chinatown to highlight its music, its culture, its cuisine— the soul and the human connection.

Encourage long-term cooperation between landlords and tenants
Tenants leaving the neighborhood is a worst-case scenario. Tenants need to be able to pay back rent in installments, and landlords need to be able to pay taxes in low-interest installment plans. There are not many prospective tenants waiting to fill vacant spaces, so the first priority should be keeping businesses where they are, with everyone taking the necessary haircuts.

Yanki Tshering
Executive Director
Business Center for New Americans

Foster collaboration between NYC architects and designers, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), and Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs)
Currently, there is an urban design company helping restaurants in Jackson Heights to apply for permits and design the outdoor seating area, etc. They are working with the 81st Street Business Improvement District (BID) in Jackson Heights, so our clients benefitted from this assistance. New York City government should be promoting this type of collaboration and generosity of spirit among architects, the BIDs, and CDFIs.

Create incentive programs to encourage local spending
The UK government created special days when the government subsidized 50 percent of the cost of meals at restaurants. New York should consider an initiative like this, or alternative ways to provide diners with rewards similar to what loyalty programs offer.

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