

Business owners object to Duval Mall pilot extension

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With all the positive feedback about the pilot test of the five-month-old Mall on Duval, there has been a quieter, slow-growing groundswell of complaints from several business owners along the three blocks that make up the weekend traffic-free zone.

Those complaints range from a drop in customers to blasting music. As a result, several business managers are against extending the Mall pilot program another six months. That extension proposal, which will keep the weekend pedestrian mall open until next February, will come up for a vote at today's city commission meeting at 5 pm at City Hall.

"We got behind the program because it was supposed to be six months," said Dan Dingeman, owner of Mango's Restaurant, 700 Duval St. "It was a pilot program. Let's look at the data and make a decision. You don't need to keep running the pilot indefinitely."



Duval Street Mall

Mango's is a popular outdoor dining spot but has seen its business shrink an average of 13.5 percent a month since the pilot program began, Dingeman said. The problem is that other indoor-only restaurants along the three block Mall are allowed under the pilot program to place tables and chairs on the sidewalk or in the street to serve food. They do not pay rent for that space. Nor do they pay the \$600 per chair impact fee Dingeman pays for his outdoor seating.

"What we're seeing is the city has essentially given free, non-leased, non-income generating [for the city] space to indoor restaurants. It's an opportunity for them to go outside and expand their business," he said, adding, "It is, in essence, unfair competition."

The pilot program, which began in February and was extended once to July 31, was aimed at giving the city and business owners a shake-down period to assess whether closing the 500, 600 and 700 blocks of Duval to vehicular traffic from 2 pm to midnight Friday through Sundays would help attract both tourists and local residents to the area. Often, on weekend evenings, the central Duval area sees a customer drop-off as people head for the food, bar and music offerings on both Lower and Upper Duval. The three central blocks of Duval have a higher percentage of retail stores and art galleries and shoppers are drawn away by entertainment options in those other areas of town.

But the Mall is not benefiting Wyland Gallery, a high-end art retailer at 623 Duval St. Owner Jay Shaffer said that his business is "99.9 percent tourist-based" and depends on visitors both driving by and walking down the sidewalk. Since the Mall hours were extended to 2 pm Friday through Sunday, that weekend drive-by traffic is gone. And now that Mall organizers have brought in entertainment, including performers from Mallory Square, people's attention is drawn to the center of the street and away from Wyland's windows.

"Once that [2 pm street closure] starts, our traffic goes way down," Shaffer said. "They're putting their backs to us, standing in the center of the street. As soon as the entertainment is over, people disburse and walk down the street."

The increased noise level is also hurting Wyland, he added. Some entertainers and several stores on the block use outdoor speakers to draw customers. The loud music and amplified entertainment are not conducive to buying art.

"Being in a fine art gallery, to communicate with our customers, this constant banging alongside of you and people getting a \$2 beer a few steps away, we have those distractions," Shaffer said.

Kellie Alpert, who owns commercial buildings at 601 Duval and 506 Southard St., operates an art gallery in her Duval Street building. She is also losing the sidewalk walkers to the center of the street. And some long-time clients don't want to come to her gallery during Mall hours, calling it "a circus."

"We're all against the Mall on Duval because it wasn't what we needed. It wasn't executed properly. But we're all for the revitalization of Duval," she said.

Alpert, Shaffer and Dingeman support cleaning up Duval along its entire length, including new crosswalks, landscaping, historic street lamps and seating areas.

"Create pocket parks up and down the street," Dingeman suggested.

"We would prefer no Mall. But we would love cleaner streets and to beautify Duval," Shaffer said.

