

## Parking spaces all over Norfolk become restaurant patios, Boush Street transforms to offer parking



By **MATTHEW KORFHAGE**

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A diner sits at a table in a former parking space on Granby street.(OpenNorfolk/Courtesy OpenNorfolk)

Nicole Seretis didn't know who to call May 15 when she wanted to add patio dining to her family's Norfolk restaurant, Orapax.

Gov. Ralph Northam had announced that restaurants could open up patio seating that day, at half capacity — and that dining rooms would have to stay closed. But the Chelsea District mainstay did not, strictly speaking, have a patio.

“I tried to get in touch with so many people,” Seretis said.

The next day, something happened that Seretis would have never expected: People from the city showed up to help her make a patio on the side of the road, with eight tables and a string of lights.

"They blocked the whole space off, put up signs, moved some cars, and we were up and running by that morning. ... We had a busier Saturday than we've seen since before the coronavirus," Seretis said.



Outdoor seating at Orapax, with lighting and barricades from OpenNorfolk(OpenNorfolk/Courtesy OpenNorfolk)

Get ready: The city of Norfolk is about to look a little like the sidewalks of Italy.

From Downtown to Ghent to Ocean View, Norfolk's streets will soon be home to row upon row of alfresco diners enjoying a meal with a glass of wine or a cocktail.

A consortium of city and private agencies have banded under the name [OpenNorfolk](#) to help businesses transform their parking lots, sidewalks and streets into outdoor dining areas in compliance with local regulations.

Norfolk isn't alone. Outdoor dining has been popping up all over Hampton Roads, as cities respond to the state's announcement about the first phase of reopening during the coronavirus pandemic.

The city of Hampton [closed the main drags of its Phoebus business district to cars](#), making way for diners and evening strollers. And the many patios of the Virginia Beach Oceanfront [were precisely half-filled with diners on a sunny Saturday afternoon](#).

But Norfolk has taken a few extraordinary steps.

The city's planning department offered [blanket approval](#) to transform [a vast swath of Norfolk's street parking spaces into dining areas](#), across many of the city's densest commercial corridors — neatly snipping much of the red tape for restaurants that lack patios or parking lots.

Sections of Granby Street from downtown to Riverview, parts of 21st Street and Colley Avenue in Ghent and Kensington, 35th Street in Park Place, and 1st View in Ocean View can now transform some of their parking spots into dining room tables, with the help and blessing of the city.

OpenNorfolk is also toying with the idea of shutting down Market and Tazewell streets, between Granby Street and Monticello Avenue downtown — and turning the entire streets into restaurant patios.

“In the more suburban parts of the city, most restaurants have their own private parking, and those parking lots became the place where they could set up outdoor dining,” says Norfolk Planning Director George Homewood. “Where we don't have that is downtown, the pedestrian commercial overlays, North Colley, emerging districts where there's just not enough private parking to convert into substantial outdoor seating.”

Because of [a streamlined approval process from the state Alcoholic Beverage Control Authority](#), restaurants that get city approval are also able to quickly get permission to serve alcohol in spaces within 100 feet of the restaurant.

To make up for the new deficit in street parking downtown, the city is turning two lanes of four-lane Boush Street into parking spaces, for easy access to the downtown restaurant district.

Between Martin's Lane and Bute Street, cars can park on Boush's outer lanes for free for two hours. The city also added a multi-use lane for walking and biking.

Homewood calls the plan an exercise in "experimental entrepreneurialism" — essentially, running out and trying something big, because maybe it might work.

"We knew that we needed to do interventions," he said. "We felt like the best thing was for us to get out in front of it, define what's possible, and make it as easy as possible."

And none of it will cost more than the usual department budget, Homewood said.

"We reprogrammed a few things, but every bit of this is very low-cost intervention," Homewood said.

Andrew Howard, of national consulting agency Team Better Block, drove his RV up from Texas to offer logistical help. The Downtown Norfolk Council is working with businesses downtown, including Chicho's, Tap It Local and The Stockpot.

And the city-contracted urban design firm, Work Program Architects, diverted its energy from planning for the distant future to the much more immediate problems faced by restaurants.

"We kept asking, 'Is there something we can do?'" WPA co-founder Mel Price said. "We have funds from the city that won't roll over to next year. Is there something we can do to help this start again?"

It was Price who first showed up at Orapax's door on Saturday, and she's also been busy combing the city for other restaurants that might need help setting up patios.

"Sometimes they call, sometimes I call them. Sometimes I'm driving by and I just stop," Price said.

As of Wednesday, OpenNorfolk has been in touch with about 70 businesses about setting up patios and "parklets" — a city planning term for blocked-off extensions of the sidewalk.

Many of the businesses with parking lots — such as Elation Brewing and Cogan's Pizza on Colley Avenue — didn't need much more than a consultation with the city to set up their outdoor patios. When the weather gets better, Elation owner Kenny Vanhook says he expects to have 85 outdoor seats available for neighborhood beer fans.

In other cases, OpenNorfolk might block off areas of the street with cordons, barriers, and signs.

For small restaurants that don't have the resources, Price's team is using funds from their planning contract with the city to do some more expansive interventions. Price also procured some tables and chairs for businesses that need them.

For Ericka Crowder at Cutta's Kitchen on 35th Avenue in Park Place, outdoor seating is the difference between being open and closed. Her business has been shut down for the past month, but she plans to reopen next week, after OpenNorfolk finishes building a parklet in front of her breakfast and lunch cafe.

"Now I get to see my customers," Crowder said.

Down the street on 35th, Beverly McDonald at soul food restaurant Croaker's Spot said her new parklet is a godsend.

"My nephew called me to say that someone is here talking about doing sidewalk dining. I must've hit a hundred to get there — I started running out of my vehicle. Everyone had masks, I had a mask, too. I said, 'How much is this going to cost?' And they said 'No, the city is providing.' I almost peed on myself I was so happy. I told them, 'You all will be seeing a lot of tears.'"



Beverly McDonald (front) stands in front of the new "parklet" that city organization OpenNorfolk is building as an outdoor dining area for her restaurant, Croaker's Spot. (OpenNorfolk/Courtesy OpenNorfolk)

McDonald's parklet has been outfitted with strings of lights, and she plans to bring in flowers to enhance the dining experience to make it comparable to dining in her restaurant.

She's also been doing extensive work on her sanitation protocols to be ready for service during the coronavirus crisis. She plans to use single-use cups for water and cocktails, and to sanitize the bathroom every time a customer uses it.

But mostly, she said, she's just going to be happy to serve her diners again when she's able to open the patio this weekend.

"I'd wanted to get dining outside for some time," McDonald said, "so we're turning lemons into lemonade.... And our lemonade is delicious."

Matthew Korfhage, 757-446-2318, [matthew.korfhage@pilotonline.com](mailto:matthew.korfhage@pilotonline.com)