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Prolonged Streetscape Project Detrimental to Downtown Businesses

By: Dillon Hulse

Some businesses are disappointed in how construction has proceeded downtown along Third Street and Broadway since work began in October to upgrade the two major corridors. When asked how the construction had affected his business during the day, Dave Solzman, general manager of Table 301, summed it up in one word:

“Adversely. It’s been very impactful on us.”

The construction is all part of the City of Long Beach’s Third Street and Broadway Streetscape Project, an initiative to encourage walking and bicycle use by creating a safer travel environment. According to Jennifer Carey, executive assistant at Long Beach Public Works, completion of the project will offer visitors an all-around safer and improved downtown experience.

“Repaved streets will provide a better experience for motorists, buffered bike lanes will offer improved bike connections, and repaired and ADA compliant sidewalks mean a safer pedestrian experience,” Carey said.

The city’s website outlines that construction was supposed to begin in October, proceed along in sections that would minimize disruptions to the community, and then conclude by the end of

Dillon Hulse
CONSTR

February; however, cones still line the unstriped streets, trucks with illuminated messages and arrows continue to block lanes, and – combined with the Blue Line construction that began in January – the work continues to impact businesses and contribute to a general cloud of confusion downtown.

“I think it’s impacted business greatly,” said Jaz Estrin, manager at Burgerim on Third Street.

“There’s much less foot traffic, people are having a hard time parking, ya know?”

According to Carey, businesses represented a “key component” in the planning stages and were informed about the project well ahead of time. A community meeting was also hosted by the city, in coordination with the Downtown Long Beach Alliance, to allow “businesses and residents to come and learn about the project and voice their concerns.”

Both Solzman and Estrin acknowledge the meeting, but say it failed to communicate the actual effect on the area.

“It didn’t really prepare me for how much was actually gonna be happening because the meeting made it sound like it was going to be in sections, and it has been; however, it didn’t seem to follow the plan. I didn’t anticipate so much activity, in so many areas, all at the same time,” said Estrin.

“I don’t have a problem with the project itself; I know they think they did it with businesses in mind, but it’s mostly lip service. If they really wanted to do it with businesses in mind, they

could've at least not jackhammered during my lunch period," said Solzman. "They could've done it before, and they could've done it after. I don't know if there was a reason for it or not; I just know how it affected us."

Uncharacteristic rain and low temperatures combined with the typically slow January and February months to further stall construction and strain the restaurants. Carey said that paving had to be postponed between three and seven days, at times, because the street must be completely dry before continuing.

The construction has presented several challenges for the two fledgling businesses, both of which have opened since January of last year. Fencing and trucks in front of the restaurants have reduced visibility and available parking; customers have complained about online delivery times while drivers struggle to find parking to retrieve the orders; and air quality has also suffered as a result.

"It impacts us because we generally like to have our windows open during nicer days like today," said Olivia Held, supervisor at King's Fish House. "But, unfortunately, with all the construction it just puts too much dust into the air, and that dust ends up coming in and ruining the experience for our guests who are dining by the windows."

Carey says that crews are in the final stages of the project and that the city currently expects construction to be completed before the Grand Prix, ahead of the influx of people who will arrive for the event.

Dillon Hulse
CONSTR

“It’s a double-edged sword, right? Ya know, because you want the infrastructure to be in good shape, and hopefully the outcome will be beneficial, but that’s yet to be seen,” said Estrin.

The Long Beach Grand Prix will begin on Friday, April 12.