

MAINSTREET MOVES, VENTURA - TOPIC REVIEW, DATA ANALYSIS, RECOMMENDATIONS

OVERVIEW

Main Street Moves (hereafter referred to as “MSM”) is comprised of a vehicular street closure in the downtown region of Ventura, California. MSM hosts primarily restaurants and boutique-style shops, making up 16% of Ventura’s “downtown” sales tax contributors, and was created shortly after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the interest of providing relief to businesses and residents facing ongoing public health closures and social distancing protocols.

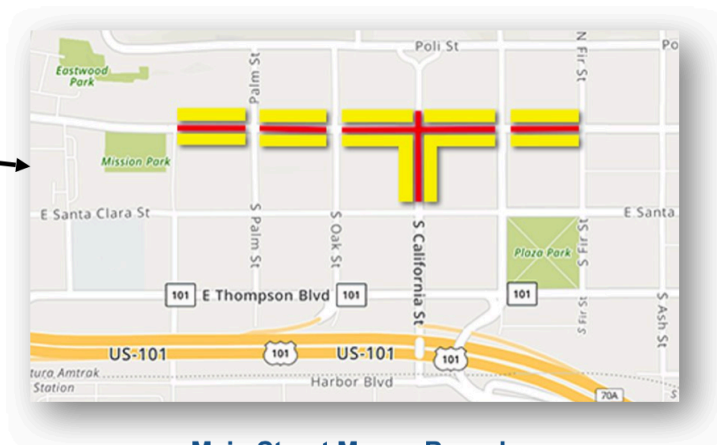
The issue of MSM has returned to the City of Ventura City Council numerous times since its development, and is slated for review and vote again on 9/16/2025. At the time of this vote, Council will be evaluating risks involved with pending litigation brought via property owner objections, at which time closure through California Vehicle Code 21101(a)(1) already approved by Council may no longer be an option. If Council votes to reopen in the face of these objections, MSM will reopen to vehicular traffic on 11/3/2025.

Notably, there is (1) a significant amount of misinformation, (2) conflicting data claims, and (3) marked increases in polarization and heated debate on the topic of MSM seen on social media and in in-person social settings around the county. Preliminary data identified by the City of Ventura’s contracted consultant True North indicates near-equal opinions, with only slight margins of favorability on specific, weighted questions, among property and business owners. This is replicated in our analysis of residents, with a 53-47 % split in favor of reopening the area to vehicular traffic. This polarization of survey results is one, among many, reasons why MSM remains a difficult issue to resolve.

The following pages of this Policy Brief include extensive topic review with complicating factors, data analysis, and recommendations.



Downtown Ventura Boundary
1,197 Sales Tax Contributors



Main Street Moves Boundary
191 Sales Tax Contributors

Source: City of Ventura

RECENT ACTIONS AND COMPLICATIONS RE: MSM

APRIL 2025: City of Ventura Council adopted a resolution of intention to close permanently MSM to vehicular traffic under the California Pedestrian Mall Law of 1960.

City of Ventura received objections by 50% of property owners located within MSM, which nullified the California Pedestrian Mall Law of 1960 as an option for permanent closure, for at least one year.

SPRING/SUMMER 2025: City of Ventura proceeded with MSM closure under California Vehicle Code Section 21101(a)(1), which allows for local governments to close portions of vehicular highways to through traffic if they deem the area no longer suitable or needed for public use.

City of Ventura received notice of pending litigation that would make closure of MSM under California Vehicle Code Section 21101(a)(1) no longer a viable option. Litigation could potentially include a challenge of the basis for enacting the code, as well as monetary penalties exceeding \$250M.

SEPTEMBER 16, 2025: City of Ventura Council will revisit the issue of MSM in light of recent actions and complications. If the Council votes to reopen MSM, it will open on 11/3/2025.

ARGUMENTS FOR REOPENING MSM

- Closing Main Street forces customers to park blocks away, causing parking difficulties and eliminating the likelihood of “quick trips,” though new Daylighting Laws will reduce the number of parking spaces that would become available should MSM reopen
- Reopening would likely increase weekday economic activity
- A permanent closure of MSM may prove cost prohibitive for property owners and businesses due to required safety improvements and permitting to install new parklets
- Some businesses have been hurt and/or closed by MSM
- Studies indicate that pedestrian malls rarely work as a regional economic stimulus

ARGUMENTS FOR PERMANENTLY CLOSING MSM TO VEHICULAR TRAFFIC

- Some business have experienced higher foot traffic and sales during certain periods of the MSM closure
- Customers tend to prefer outdoor dining options since the COVID 19 pandemic; permanent closure of MSM would allow for all current parklets to remain in use *only after* initial removal slated for January 2026 and replacement with safer design permitting and options (opposed to a 40% reduction should MSM reopen)
- Keeping MSM closed would offer more family-friendly activities within the space, which may or may not translate into additional business and sales tax revenue generation
- Closing MSM permanently may reduce crime and improve safety; however, studies indicate the inverse is true during periods of declining foot traffic and economic activity

KEY TAKEAWAYS

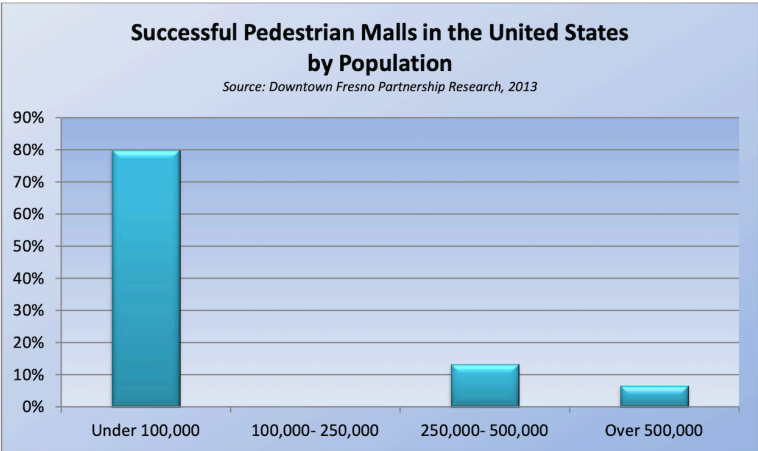
Many arguments in favor of either reopening MSM or permanently closing MSM to vehicular traffic make conflicting claims. For example: many businesses have suffered or closed as a result of MSM, while other businesses have been helped or seen an increase in sales revenues. Each “side” of these arguments remains equally valid. This highlights the complexity of the issue given the City’s obligation to *all* stakeholders.

Safety factors require significant changes whether MSM reopens or permanently closes to vehicular traffic. Studies indicate 55% of Americans prefer dining outdoors since the COVID 19 pandemic, indicating MSM should retain some type of parcel options for restaurants. If MSM reopens, there would be a required 40% reduction in parklets for outdoor dining. All current parklets, however, will be removed by January 2026, to be replaced by a newer, safer design and permitting process - regardless of if MSM reopens or remains permanently closed to vehicular traffic.

There is no data supporting many of the claims made by both sides of the argument. This limits the ability for City of Ventura policymakers to select an appropriate option implementing evidence-based remedies. Studies relative to crime reduction, pedestrian malls, and the ability for street closures and family-friendly activities to convert to sales remain mixed and conflicting. This highlights further complexities.

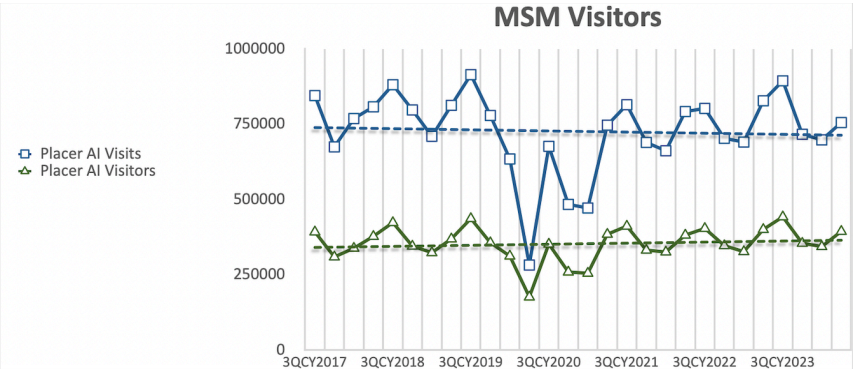
DISCUSSION: LOCAL ECONOMY

As outlined in the True North survey results, Pedestrian Malls have overwhelmingly failed across multiple studies conducted across the United States. Overall, 89% of Pedestrian Malls have failed and eventually reopened to traffic. Of the 11% of Pedestrian Malls that have succeeded, 80% were in cities characterized by less than 100,000 residents with tourism accounting for both the majority of regional GDP and workforce. In the City of Ventura, tourism is a driving force behind regional GDP; however, only accounts for around 4% of the city's workforce, and is home to nearly 110,000 residents.



Source: The Experiment of American Pedestrian Malls

Data from foot traffic analysis indicates seasonal volumes of visits and visistors to MSM. In other words, whether or not people both traveling to or living in the City of Ventura visit MSM is based upon external factors, most notably weather-related ones. The City has agregated data evidencing the impacts of rain on sales tax revenues over the years, while additional factors such as school and travel schedules, holidays, and other weather and climate issues appear to also impact foot traffic.



Source: True North MSM Survey

Sales tax data further reflects other impacts outside the control of the City of Ventura that may affect business activity and revenues. At the time of the True North survey publication, the analysis (2024) noted a decline in year-over-year sales tax revenues in MSM exceeding that of areas in the Downtown region excluding MSM. This is to say that sales tax revenues decreased inside MSM more than outside, in fact lowering the overall downtown revenues by more than -1%. Sales tax revenues to date (2025) remain lower than previous years for the second year in a row, as inflation, interest rates, and fears of a global economic downturn curb consumer spending. Sales tax and foot traffic data suggest an interesting trend, though, of MSM visitors increasing, though less repeated trips and fewer transactions are taking place overall. This was replicated in our survey, with 68% of respondents stating they have visited MSM in the last 12 months, though visited only 0-2 times, and 100% of survey respondents that answered indicating they typically spend under \$250 at MSM. Given these, and the aforementioned contradicting, factors, sustainable, long term economic stimulus is therefore not a strong argument for the continued closure of MSM to vehicle traffic.

Money Typically Spent at MSM



Source: Heather Schmidt Consulting Services 2025 Survey

DISCUSSION: STAKEHOLDER ATTITUDES TOWARD REOPENING

Given that the City of Ventura Council represents all stakeholders equally, the decision on how to manage MSM going forward is complicated by the ambiguity of any clearly evidenced majority opinion.

PROPERTY OWNERS

Owners of the properties comprising MSM have indicated a consistent majority in favor of reopening MSM to vehicular traffic. Initial unweighted preferences, though, were higher (60%) in favor of reopening prior to financial disclosures and hearing the arguments relative to reopen/remain closed. This is to say that additional information and consideration rendered 2-3% fewer property owners reporting a preference for reopening MSM to vehicular traffic.

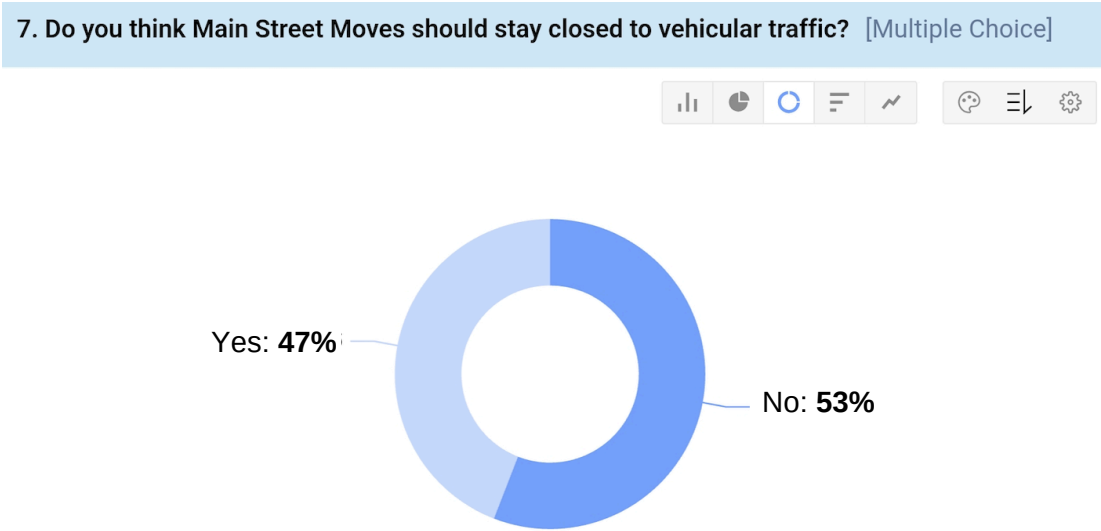
Nevertheless, an overall unweighted total of 57% of property owners in MSM prefer reopening to vehicular traffic. This is likely further evidenced by the filed objection to the Pedestrian Mall resolution in April 2025, as well as the pending litigation against the City of Ventura.

BUSINESS OWNERS

The inverse occurred for business owners in the MSM portion of Downtown Ventura. Prior to consideration of financial disclosures and arguments, fewer business owners wanted MSM to reopen to vehicular traffic. Business owner preferences increased towards reopening (**though still remained in the minority at ~47% in favor**).

GENERAL PUBLIC

Our survey asked numerous questions about frequency of use, reasons for visiting, and money amounts spent prior to offering survey respondents fixed response options of “Yes” or “No” relative to potentially reopening MSM. **53% of survey respondents indicated the desire to reopen MSM to vehicular traffic.**



Source: Heather Schmidt Consulting Services 2025 Survey

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

Other factors outside the control of the City of Ventura as an organization compound the complexity of the problem with deciding the future of MSM. Those include, but are not limited to: (1) climate and weather patterns changing, (2) ongoing economic uncertainty local and abroad, (3) political polarization and its impacts on regional economic activity (e.g. businesses impacted by increases in political issues, events, and attitudes), (4) intended litigation on the part of the property owners and the interpretation of California Vehicle Code Section 21101(a)(1) by the assigned judge, (5) and more. And in fact, the issue of MSM on the whole evidences the polarization seen locally as is the case around the world: numerous surveys crossing various stakeholders indicate strong division on the issue of whether or not to open MSM. This division, and concerns about potential re-election in future years, likely leaves City of Ventura Council policymakers in the position of making unpalatable decisions to - in most cases - around half of their constituents base.

Nevertheless, the consistently fluctuating sales tax revenues generated by MSM appear insufficient to outweigh the risks associated with anticipated litigation on the part of the property owners. California Vehicle Code Section 21101(a)(1) allows for closures to vehicular traffic in instances where public use is no longer necessary or warranted; however, as pandemic-era closures are long over, such conditions are likely to be considered unrepresentative.

Still yet, there is a reasonable argument for a hybrid-type model to be implemented. This model would consider seasonal fluctuations and offer a period of traditionally higher-than-normal volume foot traffic and sales tax revenue for future closures (e.g. limited spring and summer months). The City of Ventura could, as one example, close MSM to traffic for the months of June, July, and August, and there is a significant body of evidence in foot traffic and sales tax data to support this. As a more flexible, hybrid model, it may also potentially be implemented for special events, and have standing against the guidance outlined in California Vehicle Code Section 21101(a)(1).

This is a viable option not only due to foot traffic and sales tax revenues during those periods, but also out of a reflection of the near-equally divided attitudes across all stakeholder groups. It also addresses the need to be more flexible to address safety, weather, and economic considerations. As all parklets face required removal in January 2026 anyway, businesses that wish to permit and build out the newer, safer models are likely to reduce the number of participants. More permanent parklets designed for safety amidst moving traffic are presently in practice through out Ventura County in other downtown city centers already and have evidenced limited success. This will likely deal with the 40% parklet reduction on its own.

The malleability of this hybrid model, coupled with the already-approved \$2M earmarked by the City of Ventura Council for more permanent equipment and infrastructure for MSM offers a flexible and fair compromise that should offer all stakeholders enough concessions so as to avoid future conflict or debate. Therefore, a hybrid model that considers seasonality and community input, coupled with raw economic data and preservation of organizational fiscal solvency, is the ideal course for the City of Ventura to take on 9/16/2025.



DISCLOSURES

HEATHER SCHMIDT CONSULTING SERVICES, and no individuals within it, are affiliated with any parties implicated in Main Street Moves, the Downtown Ventura sector, the City of Ventura, or any other individuals or organizations with a vested or unvested position in MSM.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Data obtained in this Policy Brief was done so via phone, email, text message, in person data gathering, social media, and online surveys. Our sample groups were chosen at random across numerous sections and neighborhoods of Ventura, California. Research into previous surveys and data was obtained via Public Records Act requests through the City of Ventura, as well as additional research and analysis performed outside the County of Ventura.

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