Pittsburgh 'sparking' up Downtown, Allentown

BOB BAUDER (https://twitter.com/BobBauder) | Monday, May 7, 2018, 4:42 p.m.
Edward Lai, owner of Bae Bae's restaurant in Downtown Pittsburgh, is planning a “spark” for an area between two trees in front of his business. The covered platform extending into the street will feature tables, chairs, and greenery.

Pittsburgh hopes to spark interest in neighborhood business districts with the addition of small sidewalk parks — dubbed “sparks” — that extend into street parking lanes and feature seats and space for visitors to interact.

The Mayor’s Office is seeking City Council approval for sparks at Bae Bae's Kitchen, which serves Korean-inspired cuisine on Liberty Avenue, Downtown, and at Onion Maiden, a vegan restaurant, on East Warrington Avenue in the city's Allentown neighborhood. If approved, they will open in June.

The concept includes wooden platforms that extend from curbs and take up one or two parking spaces. They can include seating and landscaping and must be removed during winter months.

Pittsburgh will expand the concept if it's successful. Business owners are responsible for all costs, according to Kristin Saunders, a city transportation planner.

“They're temporary public seating areas,” Saunders said. “It's a facility to support increased pedestrian activity. They're sponsored by a neighboring business or property owner, and they can cost anywhere from $12,000 to $20,000.”
Edward Lai, owner of Bae Bae's, is planning an open-air “greenhouse” style spark with tables, chairs and plantings underneath a roof made of transparent material. A rain barrel will catch runoff from the roof and be used to water the plants and flowers.

The spark will be 10 feet wide with 4-foot buffers on each side and can be disassembled. Sparks must be removed in November.

“It's a public space, so anybody walking by can use it,” Lai said. “They can bring food from us, or anywhere else, come in and enjoy the park space.”

Lai retained a landscape architect for the design and said the spark is costing “a good penny” but declined to give the exact amount. He said the structure would improve the look of upper Liberty Avenue and hopefully bring more visitors to that part of Downtown.

“I want to increase the community of Liberty where people feel a little safer and spend more time on the street,” he said.

The owners of the Maiden Onion could not be reached. Their spark will be 20 feet long and 7 feet wide and contain two wooden benches and a wooden table, according to council's Tuesday agenda.

“It will act as a public gathering space on East Warrington, which is something we don't have right now,” said Gordon Hall, the business district manager for East Warrington and Allentown.

Saunders said other cities across the country, including Philadelphia, have sparks but call them parklets.

“In Pittsburgh, we already had something called a parklet, so we had to come up with a new name,” she said.

Council will discuss and vote on the two sparks in coming weeks.

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