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When North Carolina officials ordered restaurants to shut down indoor dining in March because of COVID-19, Justin Gallus feared the worst.

The co-owner of [Plates Neighborhood Kitchen](#), a hip Southern fusion restaurant in downtown Raleigh, relied on customers eating inside or on the large outdoor patio.

The restaurant never did pickup or takeout before, Gallus said, but that ended up

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Like Raleigh, many cities, from Boston to Milwaukee to Seattle, created temporary curbside food pickup zones for takeout and delivery on busy streets to aid restaurants. They posted signs, covered up parking meters or put up barricades. And even after most states later began allowing limited indoor dining, lots of cities and some counties are continuing to keep those zones in place.

But once the pandemic subsides, officials will face a debate over whether and how long to keep the zones. Cities want the revenue parking meters bring, and other retail businesses want the parking space for their customers.

The National Association of City Transportation Officials, which represents major cities and transit agencies, estimates that at least 100 U.S. cities have created curbside pickup zones for restaurants, according to spokesperson Alex Engel.

That's been a lifeline for restaurant owners, said Mike Whatley, a vice president at the National Restaurant Association, an industry trade group.

Since the start of the pandemic, the association estimates that 15,000 to 20,000 restaurants and dining establishments have permanently shut down, and it projects the final number will be much higher. It also forecasts that the industry is on track to lose \$240 billion in revenue by the year's end.

"These curbside pickup zones are incredibly helpful. During COVID they've become essential," Whatley said. "The ability to pull right in front of a restaurant and have someone come out and give you the meal is efficient. And if you're nervous about coming in, you don't have to step inside."

For Gallus, having the special zone is important because without the revenue from pickup and takeout, his business would be "in more dire financial straits" than it is already.

“It’s going to be an integral part of our business model at least in 2021 and maybe

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June.

In Denver, for a few months, the city’s transportation department allowed motorists to park for free, for as long as they wanted, at most metered spots. Enforcement resumed in June to allow turnover of spaces and access to businesses that had reopened.

During the pandemic, some cities and counties also started allowing sidewalk dining, or closed off parking lanes or even whole streets to make space for curbside cafes or “streateries” that offer outdoor restaurant seating in places meant for vehicles. In Tampa, officials suspended city code to let restaurants expand onto public sidewalks and offer outdoor cafe seating.

In Oklahoma City, officials created an administrative permit process for restaurants to temporarily operate in adjacent on-street parking spaces.

Some cities and counties established both streateries and curbside restaurant pickup zones.

In Montgomery County, Maryland, a Washington, D.C., suburb, transportation officials closed off entire streets in some areas to permit restaurants to set up tables for outdoor dining.

“As engineers, we have a certain perspective about how the road was to be used. Then we thought maybe it could be repurposed to help restaurants,” said Michael Paylor, traffic engineering chief for the county’s Department of Transportation. “It’s a fantastic idea.”

The county also created 42 temporary curbside pickup zones for restaurants. It bagged meters and installed signs notifying users that the spaces were for food pickup and delivery.

“We wanted to help keep these businesses viable during this emergency,” Paylor said.

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In Austin, which had created 71 food priority zones for restaurants using about 500 parking spaces, officials decided in June to change its plan after the state allowed businesses to reopen and no longer prohibited indoor dining.

“We knew it was going to be important that we had plenty of parking space availability for people to go to the brick-and-mortar places and the businesses downtown,” said Jason Redfern, Austin Transportation’s parking enterprise manager.

So Austin did away with its restaurant pickup zones in June and instead used its existing parking app to give customers two free validations for 15 minutes each and allow them to use any of the 3,000 downtown metered parking spaces.

“Carving out parking spaces in front of a business just for that business’s use is not something we are wanting to continue,” Redfern said. “As demand picks up, we have to go back to paid parking transactions, so that the businesses that are open continue to have people coming into their business.”

But some cities, such as Raleigh, are keeping their curbside pickup zones, at least for a time.

“Downtown restaurants are the lifeblood of our downtown,” said Matthew Currier, the city’s parking manager. “By providing these zones, it helps give them a leg up.”

Workers screw pickup zone signs into posts and insert them into weighted orange cones they place on the street. They also put temporary green or orange tape along the pavement to alert drivers that it’s a curbside pickup zone.

The city now has about 120 zones adjacent to restaurants and retailers, mostly downtown and near North Carolina State University, Currier said.

He said he doesn't know how long the city will keep the zones, as it's a balancing act

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Whalley, of the Restaurant Association, said it's important for restaurant owners that curbside zones remain, especially for those customers fearful of dining in who like the convenience of pulling up to a free space and picking up their order.

"Post-COVID, I think there's going to be clamoring for that to continue," he said. "The habits being formed by consumers are becoming ingrained. ... Politicians are smart to be looking at this, in terms of curbside [zones]."

Even before the pandemic, cities already were exploring ways to transition hourly meter spaces into loading zones because of food delivery services such as Uber Eats and Grubhub, said Anne Brown, an assistant professor at the University of Oregon who studies parking and transportation policy.

"COVID has accelerated the degree to which cities have already been thinking about ways to change parking," she said.

But that doesn't mean authorities will stop issuing citations for parking violations, she added. "There has to be enforcement. Otherwise, what will stop a car from parking in front of a popular business establishment for a month?"

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