

Comments of Small Business Majority's NYC Council's Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure and the Committee on Consumer and Worker Protection on Int. Nos. 1421, 1444, and 1446

Chairs Menin and Brooks-Powers,

Thank you for giving us the opportunity today to share our thoughts on the importance of outdoor dining to our city's small business community and to express our support for Int. Nos. 1421, 1444, and 1446 to improve the Dining Out NYC program. My name is Lindsey Vigoda and I am the New York Director at Small Business Majority. We are a national organization with a mission to empower small business owners to build a thriving and equitable economy.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we revolutionized outdoor dining in this city. It allowed businesses to serve their customers safely, it increased the capacity of restaurants to make up for lost profits from the early stages of the pandemic, and it brought life back to the streets of New York. Between the high costs of commercial leasing, housing, and healthcare, the current and impending threats of tariffs, and continual recovery from outstanding pandemic debts, running a business in this city has become unbearably expensive for small business owners. And continued, new regulations have made outdoor dining licenses inaccessible to thousands of small businesses.

To support our city's entrepreneurs, we are seeking implementation of these key measures. The first, and potentially most important, is through the reduction of fees. The licensing is currently too slow, and fees remain too high for many restaurants to pay upfront or at all. These fees should be reduced and available to pay in installments. This will not only increase revenue for the city but also increase accessibility for our small business restaurant owners who already run on thin margins. Additionally, we must speed up the processing time for these licenses. Outdoor dining is a lifeline for restaurant owners who need to grow their business without an option to move locations. The slower the process takes, the more likely we will see our struggling small business restaurants closing.

Additionally, many small businesses invested thousands into their outdoor dining enclosures during the pandemic. These structures are expensive to construct and difficult to store. New York City must allow roadway cafes that meet specific standards to remain open year-round. For those who do not meet these standards, the city should provide winter storage as part of the fees businesses are already paying to participate in the outdoor dining program.

As the cost of doing business in New York City skyrockets, we must do everything we can for our city's entrepreneurs to support them as they change and grow. New Yorkers are begging for third spaces, and small businesses are ready to provide them. Our small restaurant and storefront owners have always been and always will be the soul of our neighborhoods. To ensure we don't lose this heart, we must streamline applications, make outdoor dining more accessible and keep costs low for restaurant owners who are looking at this avenue to grow their business and revenue.

Thank you for supporting these bills. I look forward to continuing this conversation and collaborating to continue to remove barriers to entrepreneurship in our great city.