

# La Comida, Avenidas reach deal to keep senior lunch program downtown

After a prolonged dispute, two nonprofits agree to return La Comida's lunch program to Avenidas building

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After scrambling for months to find a new dining location for its senior lunch program, local nonprofit La Comida is preparing to return to a place well-familiar to many of its diners: the Avenidas building on Bryant Street in Palo Alto.

The two nonprofits — La Comida and Avenidas — have reached a deal for temporary space that would accommodate the lunch program, Avenidas announced Thursday afternoon, July 6. The new deal will take effect on July 10, when La Comida begins to host its lunch programs at 450 Bryant St.

The deal came together at the eleventh hour as La Comida scrambled to find a new home before its lunch program stood to lose crucial funding. The nonprofit, which has been handing out takeout lunches on weekdays in front of First United Methodist Church on Hamilton Avenue, was required to return to congregate dining this month to remain eligible for state and federal grants.

The exemption that La Comida has relied on during the pandemic to run the takeout program no longer applies now that California's state of emergency is no longer in effect.

Under the new deal, Avenidas will host diners in a hybrid indoor and outdoor space. The dining area will include 28 indoor spaces and 37 spaces outside in a tented area that would be established in the Avenidas parking lot on Ramona Street. The program will run Monday to Friday, between 11:45 a.m. and 12:30 p.m.

In addition to the downtown program, La Comida will continue to run its congregate lunch program at Stevenson House in south Palo Alto.

The agreement represents a breakthrough for La Comida and a reconciliation between two nonprofits that had worked together for decades before an acrimonious split in 2017. For nearly 40 years, La Comida had served its meals inside the Avenidas building, an arrangement that came to a halt when Avenidas began an ambitious reconstruction of its Bryant Street location. La Comida split off after determining that the new dining area would be too small to accommodate its needs.

The prospect of La Comida losing its downtown location became an issue for the City Council and Mayor Lydia Kou, a longtime La Comida volunteer whose husband, John St. Clair III, serves on the nonprofit's board of directors.

In her "State of the City" speech, Kou supported having the city play a role in finding a new downtown location for the nonprofit. She also directed the city attorney's office to take a look at the city's agreement with its primary senior-services provider, Avenidas, to see if there was anything there that could require a dining program.

Council member Ed Lauing, who serves as the council's liaison to Avenidas, said the city is thrilled to support this agreement between Avenidas and La Comida.

"We will continue to work together to ensure a permanent home for this important community service," Lauing said.

The nonprofit has seen demand for lunches expand during the pandemic. According to Bill Blodgett, co-president of the La Comida board, the number of daily meals it has been serving at its two locations jumped from about 170 before the pandemic to about 350 during the pandemic (it is currently at about 300).

During an interview in April, Blodgett said he is hoping to find a downtown location with about 50 seats, which could accommodate about 100 diners because of turnover over the lunch period.

St. Clair III said in a news release that food insecurity is "on the minds of many seniors, even in an affluent city like Palo Alto.

"Our program is designed to minimize that fear." St. Clair III, vice president of the La Comida board, said. "We are happy to temporarily share space with Avenidas, a senior center in a familiar location, giving seniors a space to connect with friends and learn more about other Avenidas programs."

As part of the new agreement, La Comida will use the new Avenidas building but will continue its search for a "permanent home in Palo Alto that will accommodate their current and future growth of diners," according to the announcement.

Amy Yotopoulos, president and CEO of Avenidas, touted the importance of social connections to a senior's quality of life.

"We are delighted to welcome La Comida diners to Avenidas," Yotopoulos said in a news release. "Social connection is a crucial part of a senior's quality of life and that is something we strive to do with all our programming and services, like case management, senior transportation, facilitating legal, Medicare, and tax assistance, grocery delivery and caregiver support."