First Ward News

An occasional update **July, 2010**

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More than you ever wanted to know about parking

Oddly enough, there are a lot of issues circling around parking in our fair city. Now that summer is officially here, some of us have taken a deep breath because lots are less full, streets have fewer cars parked on them, and we can all expect to find a place to park. But I still find that specific issues about parking are regularly a topic, and I would like to address some of them.

Since all issues are not equally compelling, I want you to know up front which topics have attracted my attention: **Residential Parking Permits**; **Parking Master Plans** (including parking enforcement hours and parking rates) and the **Mutually Beneficial Committees** (who are negotiating the parking contract between the DDA and the City); the **Library Lot Parking Structure**; the **Fuller Transit Station**; and the proposed **Payment in Lieu of Parking** (for new downtown developments).

If you make it through all of this (or even if you don't) feel free to take this small survey on parking. I'd really like to know what you think about parking in Ann Arbor, and the issues below.

Residential Parking Permits

It's always best to start with something finished.

At the last meeting in June and the first meeting in July, City Council approved residential parking permits for two areas in the First Ward – the Old Fourth Ward and the South University Neighborhood (which is just across Washtenaw, off Geddes). These two neighborhoods join a few others near the downtown that will provide permits to residents but will offer non-residents of the neighborhood limited parking options. In some cases, non-residents will be able to park on only one side of the street; in other cases, only for two hours on any given day.

Both of these neighborhoods requested this permit parking requirement because the University built North Quad but didn't build any parking for the staff or the students. While the University offers parking far from Central Campus and bus transportation to the campus, many in the nearby neighborhoods anticipated that some of the 800 or more students and staff associated with North Quad would be tempted to park closer to the building. The residents of these neighborhoods also believed, based on previous experience, that some cars would be stored for months, and would move only at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and semester breaks.

Last year, certain streets in the Old Fourth Ward had been identified as appropriate for placing parking meters because the City anticipated increased demand for parking in this neighborhood, among others. Parking meters, however, affect residents and non-residents equally and also change the sense of a neighborhood from residential to commercial. Council members objected, residents objected, and meters were not placed in neighborhoods. Residential parking permits took longer than anticipated to get organized and passed through Council.

Council member Sandi Smith worked closely with residents of both Old Fourth Ward and the South University Neighborhood to get these changes completed and through Council. I was pleased to work with her on this project, and to co-sponsor.

Are residential parking permits the solution for every near downtown neighborhood? Many residents in these neighborhoods believe they are. They would like to see the commuters and shoppers have to park in parking structures and parking lots and pay for their parking. They would like to be able to park near their own homes and, when needed, have a repair truck also park near their home.

Would you support Residential Permit Parking for all the near downtown neighborhoods?

Parking Master Plans and The Mutually Beneficial Committees

First, a little background – and it's all related to the budget. The City and the DDA entered into a 10-year contract in 2005. In this contract, the DDA agreed to manage the parking system within the DDA area (plus a little bit more) and would pay the City $1 million per year from the parking revenues. They also agreed that the City could, in any given year, withdraw $2 million.

The City withdrew $2 million from the parking revenues each year in the first 5 years. By this June, all the money in the contract had been paid to the City, with 5 years remaining on the contract.

Of course, the City Council and staff knew this, as did the DDA. Last year, the DDA and the City appointed committees to discuss a new parking contract. They didn't meet together, however, and a new contract wasn't signed before the new budget was approved. (If you want to read more about this, there has been a lot of coverage on The Ann Arbor Chronicle. I wouldn't want to rehash it all here.)

In the meantime, though, the Council agreed that the DDA should draft a Parking Management Plan. This plan would create an over-all plan for all parking — from what meters cost and where they were located to how parking permits were granted. At the same time, the City staff was looking at the structure of parking fines. (These things aren't really coordinated, but if we had a some agreed-upon management plan, they might be.) The Council continued to postpone making a decision on the parking fine structure until the Parking Management Plan was completed. Both were presented to Council at the same time — just before the budget was approved in May. Although the Parking Management Plan was discussed then, and is still being discussed, the revised parking fine structure passed without much discussion.

And in the end, the DDA agreed to give the City $2 million for the fiscal year that started July 1 — without a new contract — and the City agreed to start up formal meetings between a reestablished Mutually Beneficial Committee made up of Council members and the one made up of DDA members. Here's a link to the resolution that Council approved, reestablishing this committee.

That's enough history. I'm not on the committee. I'm not attending the meetings. Everything I know I learned from reading and listening to others.

But what does all this have to do with us? Well, many of us still go downtown to work and shop. When we do, we probably want to park our cars. And right there we can run afoul of the parking system.

Some of us prefer to park on the street rather than in a parking structure or parking lot. The new parking meters take coins, bills, debit and credit cards. They even take pre-paid cards (which you can buy at the Maynard Street Parking Structure). But for many people, using those new machines is slow, confusing, and frustrating. And in cold and rainy weather, using the new machines is a real turn-off. I've heard that you should be able to call a number and add time; the number isn't printed on the receipt. (It's on the machine, but are you thinking about writing the number down when you're at the machine?) At a recent meeting, I heard one merchant say that she hadn't talked with anyone who had used the 'phone call' system successfully.

Metered parking starts at 8:00 am. Is anything open at that hour that justifies parking fees for Main Street? Maybe coffee shops . . . but not many other businesses. However, knowing there isn't a demand for early morning parking doesn't mean people want to see the hours change. Some folks do, but many don't want the hours extended into the evening. The parking lots and parking structures, however, charge for parking quite late.

Parking management books that I've read indicate that on-street parking is more valuable than parking in a structure or a parking lot. We charge more per hour for parking meters in some areas, and more for metered parking than for structured parking. So why aren't we trying to push people toward the parking structures by, at least, having the same schedule for all the parking systems? I don't know the answer.

But while a parking management plan was proposed by the DDA, it hasn't been discussed by Council. There have been no neighborhood or downtown business owner/employee meetings with Council to discuss the particulars. It's there, but no one is actually talking about it.

Meanwhile, the Mutually Beneficial Committees are meeting to work out a revised contract between the DDA and the City regarding how the DDA will manage parking in the future, if it does. At the last meeting, the City's staff work remained incomplete, and the likelihood that the tasks will be complete and the committees' work will be done by October 31 (as in the resolution) looks dim.

A lot rests on this agreement. This year the $2 million from the DDA saved police and fire jobs, human services, some parks maintenance, and prevented Football Saturday parking at parks. But this 'save' was done at the last minute, which is a very bad way to plan budgets. If the DDA will contribute toward the City's budget through income from parking, shouldn't we know how much?

The Library Lot

Construction of the underground parking structure at the Library Lot continues. This summer, Fifth Avenue will be closed while the area underneath it is excavated for the underground parking structure. The work on this project includes reconstructing Division Street's cross-walks (completed), installing new utilities under Division (completed), installing new on-street parking meters on Division in the business district (not yet completed), and realigning the traffic lanes to include a bike lane nearly to the Broadway Bridge (completed). Other infrastructure changes that are finished include new cross-walks and bump-outs at Fifth Avenue and Beakes (completed). More work on Fifth Avenue remains, including new on-street parking and new cross-walks.

The underground parking structure continues to be a topic of discussion. Among the issues this election season: does the City need it? Can the City afford it? And of course, the constant unanswered question is: what goes on top?

Does the City need the underground parking structure? The short answer is: it depends on who you talk with. Depending on the time of day and where you are looking, parking is hard to find or available. Some downtown merchants regularly voice their concern about the lack of parking. Some people who shop downtown complain about how difficult parking is to find. Others state that parking is easy if you know where to look, or that they never have a problem, or that parking structures usually have free spaces. Parking is available for Main Street but not State Street, I hear; and for day time but not night time. I also hear that the number of people parking in downtown Ann Arbor is down — and this isn't positive news. But any picture of parking today is just a snapshot. <u>No one builds a parking structure only for today's needs.</u>

Parking structures (and infrastructure improvements) are supposed to be planned and built to meet both today's and tomorrow's needs. So the real question has to be, will the City really use the underground parking structure.

Street-level parking is always the most popular, but it's also the most expensive. It's expensive because there isn't room for many cars along the street <u>or</u> for that many cars in a parking lot. Although building a parking structure costs money, stacking those cars on top of each other (figuratively speaking) allows more cars to park in limited space. A related issue, and one that people bring up but don't seem to be discussing when they talk about whether the City actually needs the underground parking structure, is the future use of the various surface lots in the downtown.

Members of the public, members of City Council, and various developers eye the existing surface parking lots and think about the buildings they could hold. Some ask the City to create a master plan for how those lots will be used for 'something'. At least one lot is already designated as a future park (on William and First, as part of the Greenway). These surface lots may not be around much longer. At the same time, some of our existing parking structures are aging. In the next decade or so, members of some future Council or DDA will have to decide how much more will have to be spent to maintain these aging structures, or if it is more cost effective to tear them down.

As a community, we have talked about our downtown having more businesses and more residents. Both mean more cars, at least until someone comes up with a viable alternative. So we still have to have places to put those cars — shoppers and diners and workers and residents cars need to go somewhere.

Each of these pieces of data — the anticipated increase in parking demand that will come with increased residential and commercial growth downtown; the decrease in existing parking as surface lots become building lots and aged parking structures are re-purposed or removed — is important when planning a new structure that will last as long as the underground parking structure is expected to last. The additional 700 or so spaces may change over time, but this structure should meet Ann Arbor's future needs. And that's what it's there for.

Can the City afford the underground parking structure? This is a more complex question. The DDA and the City bonded to pay for the parking structure and the street and infrastructure improvements to Division and Fifth Avenue. The DDA plans to pay the bond back with monies raised from the parking system. That means, all the meters, the various parking structures, and the parking lots. This is how cities pay for parking structures (the bond) and how Ann Arbor has repaid this type of debt in the past (parking pays for parking). If, contrary to all our previous experience, the money from parking is not enough to pay for the bonds, the City's general fund will have to make up the shortfall.

There are other demands on the income from the parking system (notice the $2 million per year to the City's general fund, above) and the City and the DDA are renegotiating the parking management contract. The DDA asserts the money from the parking system will be adequate. I've learned enough about financial projections to know that I cannot tell the future from the past. We will all need creative problem solving skills to make the numbers work, at the DDA and at the City, for this and a number of other budget issues.

What goes on top of the parking structure? When the structure was being discussed — before it was even approved by Council — the voiced expectation was that the structure would form the foundation of a building. No one was specific about what the use of that building would be, but clearly members of Council, members of the DDA, and many members of the community believed that the logical use for an underground parking structure was as part of a major complex.

The Request for Proposals (RFP) prepared by the City received 6 responses - 4 buildings, 2 public spaces. No one was prepared for the public space proposals, although many in the community have advocated for public space next to the Library for a number of years. 2 proposals were accepted by the review committee, although both required significant public money buy-in. The process stalled (Council was supposed to receive the report and decide on a proposal in March) because both proposals wanted that public funding.

The DDA offered to find a consultant through another RFP process ($50,000) to evaluate the proposals. Council member Rapundalo has indicated that this consultant will be selected (any minute now) and will hold meetings with various groups. These groups, unfortunately, won't include groups of regular citizens. Then, somehow, there will be a report by mid-August.

I don't know what the report will say. I don't support either of the proposals I have seen that the committee is considering. Both proposals require that I commit your dollars to support a risky private venture. I'm not willing to do that.

The Fuller Transit Station

Now, I suspect it's time for the 'vision thing'. I have talked with a number of people in the First Ward about the proposed Fuller Transit Station. Some of us get our news from neighbors or blogs or reports in the media. It's really hard to get to all the meetings and make up our own minds. It's difficult to be fully informed.

There are several problems the Fuller Transit Structure brings with it. One is that it is proposed for public land that is designated park land. Another is that it appears to be another parking structure. A third, and perhaps the most difficult, is that it appears to be something from which only the University of Michigan gains any advantage.

In the past, I've tried to address each of these issues. I'm going to try to address all of them.

The biggest problem with this structure is its design. It is really a transit station. Its primary function is transit. The location of this structure was selected because it was the best location for a new train station. The existing train station (on Depot) cannot handle increased bus traffic effectively. Its parking lot is inadequate and the overflow lot is across the Broadway bridge. In winter, crossing that bridge is anything but convenient. The lot is also too small for the anticipated needs of commuters. <u>If a commuter rail system is funded between Jackson and Detroit</u>, the existing train station will not work for Ann Arbor. <u>If a high speed rail system is funded between Chicago and Detroit</u>, the existing station will not work for the region. Looking forward — as is required of good governance — the City looked for a place to build a new rail station.

It also looked at where that new rail station could be placed to maximize its convenience and minimize its impact on the surrounding neighborhoods. The location selected is not inside a residential neighborhood. It has relatively easy access to downtown and the University. It's on a divided street, so traffic into and out of the station is easy to control. It's right on the rail that would hold both commuter and high speed rail.

It's also convenient to the bus system and the biking and park trails. It is located where new transportation systems, if such get built, are expected (this corridor is between the Central and North campuses). It already gets a lot of traffic.

So, what's wrong with this picture? It's the parking structure.

At the very time the City was looking for a location for new transit, the University was planning to build two (2) 600-car parking structures within a few thousand feet of this location. Their property, but the impact on City streets would be significant. Maiden Lane, which is already very busy every morning and evening, would become even more jammed with people trying to get into these parking structures — they weren't for patients, but for workers. A solution of sorts was to partner with the University on the transit station.

If the University agreed to partner, the University could have <u>some</u> of parking it needed and not have the pressure to build structures on Maiden Lane. The partnership would change the nature of the design and the building might be more parking structure than transit center, but it would still be functionally a transit center with enough parking for both City and University needs. The partnership would also strengthen ties between City and University, which would be positive.

The University agreed. The design is driven by the proposed use (form follows function) and right now, the funding for the train is still pending. As a result, to some it appears that the City is building the University a parking structure (or allowing the University to build a parking structure on City land).

We really need to talk about our public parks. We have millages for the purchase of more park land, but little recurring funding for maintenance. Much of our City is tax-exempt — because it is public land (either County or City), University property, or public school property. We need to really discuss our community values on this issue. Do you support a transit center on Fuller? Do you believe this is a give-away to the University, and that the City gets nothing? Is it a 'sale' in all but the details to you? Is this what you think the citizens should vote on?

Payment in Lieu of Parking

This is a new idea brought forward by the DDA recently.

Because the City has approved zoning that will allow taller buildings with potentially more residences and offices in them, the DDA is anticipating an increased need for parking. However, they are also expecting that not every new building will be able to provide adequate on-site parking for the needs of their tenants and visitors. The DDA has discussed the idea of payment in lieu of parking — a fee paid voluntarily by a developer to the City (or DDA). In this manner, new construction might not be required to provide on-site parking, but could pay into a fund that would build additional parking or provide funding for mass-transit.

Do you think this is a good idea for downtown?