

Political Games Played With Downtown Parking

I'm fond of strangeness.

But not the sort being displayed by the Salem City Council. Where, strangely, a suspicious fondness for the Stop Parking Meters Downtown citizen initiative is on display. This, after repeated votes in favor of meters.

Here's a rundown on the semi-Machiavellian goings-on.

A group led by Carole Smith collected almost 9,000 signatures on an initiative petition to ban parking meters and most time limits in the Downtown Parking District.

Parking structures are exempted. Onstreet employee parking is prohibited, freeing up spaces for customers. So instead of the anticipated 20% "leakage," or loss, of visitors if parking meters were installed, the initiative was wisely designed to keep downtown Salem dynamic and welcoming.

It got enough valid signatures to make the May 2014 ballot. The Stop Parking Meters Downtown organizers now want Salemiens to vote on the initiative.

They're confident that when people hear the arguments for and against downtown meters, free unlimited onstreet parking financed by the \$435,000 annual tax currently being paid by downtown businesses will win out. This approach was favored by 63 businesses which helped with the petition drive.

The City of Salem, though, is hungry for more money. There's a lust for parking meters to feed that appetite.

So why is the City Council apparently leaning toward adopting the initiative petition at its October 14 meeting, since previously councillors and the Mayor were pushing hard for downtown parking meters?

Likely, because they don't want voters to resoundingly approve the Stop Parking Meters Downtown initiative in the May 2014 election. If this happens, the political repercussions of later overturning the Will of the People would be much more severe than if the City Council ends up overturning the Will of 9,000 Petition Signers.

Which would probably happen.

The tone at the last council meeting wasn't "We now know what the people of Salem want, free unlimited onstreet downtown parking, and we'll do our best to make this work."

Rather, the message was "We don't like this damn initiative, so we're going to put it into effect as quickly and quietly as possible; then we'll try to undermine it in various ways and get back to our parking meters plan ASAP."

Not cool. Here's my plea to City Councillors and the Mayor: be honest and straightforward with the citizens of Salem.

If you truly favor free downtown parking, say so. Urge citizens to vote "yes" on the initiative in May 2014. If it passes, collaborate with the Stop Downtown Parking Meters folks to make this policy a success. Amazingly, no one from the City has talked to them before or after they got those 9,000 signatures.

On the other hand, if you truly favor parking meters, say so. Let voters decide between meters and free parking in May.

Don't do the hypocritical "love it to death" thing. Don't pretend to endorse the initiative if you want to see it fail. Don't play political games. We've got enough of those in Washington, D.C.

Strange Up Salem seeks to lift our city's Blah Curse. Give us a Facebook like.
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