

# Free, unlimited parking clogs downtown district

Michael Rose, Statesman Journal 10:03 p.m. PDT August 23, 2014



(Photo: Thomas Patterson / Statesman Journal, Thomas Patterson / Statesman Journal)

Salem residents spoke loudly last fall: no parking time limits, no parking meters in the downtown core.

They wanted free parking. Period.

But some of the 6,000 Salem residents who signed a petition demanding free, unrestricted parking may be having second thoughts as they circle the block in a futile search for a parking space.

Lack of on-street parking in the Downtown Parking District, once a sporadic problem, is a near constant irritant. Business owners rue the day in October when Salem City Council voted to adopt a petition backed by a citizen group. The two-hour parking signs started coming down within days.

“We just aren’t getting the turnover that is critical to every single business down here.” said Lyn McPherson, co-owner of Whitlock’s Vacuum & Sewing Center on 455 Court St. NE.

The true cost of free parking is also reflected in the unsustainable method used to keep the parking district afloat. Salem’s parking fund doesn’t cover the parking district’s costs.

City officials confirmed that over the past six years, about \$6 million in urban renewal funds have been used to pay for capital improvements in the city-owned parking garages, such as replacing worn-out elevators.

## Downtown business tackles the problem

Salem City Council at today’s meeting will review a consultant’s study and staff report on parking trends. No action by the council is expected at today’s meeting, but the reports will likely prompt further discussions.

Rick Williams Consulting, the firm hired by the city, found that the turnover of parking spaces in a 10 hour period has decreased by 17 percent compared to 2012.

That amounts to lost money. Each time a parking space turnovers it results in about \$15 of spending, according to the consultant’s estimate.

The parking district is an area roughly bounded Union Street, Church Street, Trade Street and Front Street.

Businesses and property owners aren’t waiting for the city to suggest a solution to parking congestion. About 30 to 40 of them have recently held meetings and discussed the parking problem.

“If we don’t get it right, it’s our pocketbook,” said Jim Vu, who has bought the former Casey’s Hotdogs and Café building on 466 Court St. NE. A new restaurant, The Kitchen on Court Street, will soon open in the space.

Vu, who has helped coordinate the meetings, said no consensus has yet been reached by the business people. The group, however, hopes to make recommendations to Salem City Council about a short-term and long-term parking plan.

“They know what is happening now is not working for them—that’s 100 percent, across the board,” said Gayle Caldarazzo-Doty, who intends to open a grocery store with an Italian flair in the McGilchrist Building, 102 Liberty St. NE.

Caldarazzo-Doty wants the city to restore time-limited parking, such as a two- or three-hour limit, before the holiday shopping season begins.

Establishing some form of paid parking in the Downtown Parking District — such as installing “pay and display” machines that take credit or debit cards — has been discussed at the informal meetings.

But resistance to paid parking is strong in Salem. Some business owners maintain that even a small charge for on-street parking will drive a fraction of shoppers to suburban malls.

Others suggest the answer is better usage of free customer parking in the city-owned parking garages.

A survey, done in April by the city's parking consultant, found that the parking garages had more than 1,590 empty spaces during peak parking hours.

### **How parking got this way**

Nine months ago, Salem City Council adopted the intent of an initiative petition, creating a sea change in downtown parking.

The petition — backed by a group called Stop Parking Meters in Downtown Salem — called for ban on parking meters in the downtown parking district.

The petition also called for an end to the two-hour parking time limit, as well as a cap on increases in the parking tax paid by downtown businesses.

Salem City Councilor Chuck Bennett said councilors were skeptical of the move to free, unlimited parking, but given the overwhelming public support for the petition, the council chose to adopt its intent.

“The problem is it really didn't work,” he said

If the council had not taken action, the petition would have gone to voters in the May election.

Many downtowners have concluded that illegal parking by downtown employees, not customers browsing downtown shops, is the root cause of clogged on-street parking. The city's parking consultant found 195 vehicles parked on the street for at least five hours during a recent survey, which suggests employees are gaming the system.

For years, the city has prohibited downtown employees from using customer parking spaces during their work shifts. The ban has always been difficult to enforce and the move to unrestricted, on-street parking has made enforcement even more difficult.

To effectively control the problem, the city needs employers to voluntarily provide employee names and license plate numbers.

Bennett said few employers want to turn over employee data to the city, which could become part of a public record.

Carole Smith, a downtown property owner who organized the Stop Parking Meters in Downtown Salem petition drive, asserts the city hasn't made a good-faith effort to make free parking work.

Smith contends the city hasn't cracked down on downtown employees parking illegally.

“I don't know how you get the city to enforce something they don't want to do,” Smith. An action as simple as putting up signs saying “Free Customer Parking” might discourage some illegal employee parking, she said.

### **Broken system**

City officials say the the parking management system was failing even before parking rules were relaxed.

John Wales, the city's urban development director, said the previous two-hour parking limit wasn't generating sufficient parking turnover.

Costs associated with the parking district also aren't being covered by the city's parking fund. The parking fund gets its revenue from the parking tax paid by downtown business and parking permits.

For capital improvements in the parking garages, Salem has resorted to using urban renewal funds. In the fiscal 2013-2014 budget, about \$599,000 in urban renewal funds will be used for parking garage projects.

“The parking fund is broken,” Wales said.

Last summer, the city's Parking Task Force developed a set of recommendations to cure the parking troubles. The recommendations included moving to paid on-street parking, phasing out the parking tax and slowly trimming the city's reliance on urban renewal funds for parking garage improvements.

The Stop Parking Meters in Downtown Salem petition, aimed primarily at banning parking meters, took those options off the table.

“It's all predicated on there's no such thing as free parking— somebody pays,” Wales said.

## Funding gap

Salem's parking fund doesn't cover the costs associated with the Downtown Parking District. The district has an average annual shortfall of about \$500,000 per year.

To fill the funding gap, the city has resorted to using urban renewal dollars to pay for capital improvement in the city-owned parking garages, such as replacing elevators. By law, urban renewal funds can only be used for capital improvements, not maintenance or operations.

Revenue sources for parking district, fiscal year 2013-14

- Downtown parking tax paid by businesses in district: \$475,387
- Parking Permits: \$578,993
- Interest and other: \$ 33,384

Total operating revenue: \$1,087,764

Urban Renewal Funds for capital expenses: \$ 599,396

Total Resources: \$1,687,160

Expenditures, fiscal year 2013-14

Operating expenditures: \$1,037,862

Capital improvements: \$ 607,475

Total expenditures: \$1,645,337

Deficit, without subsidy from urban renewal funds (\$557,573)

Other funds

Revenue from parking tickets and from parking meters, which aren't installed in the district, are placed in the city's general fund and used for city-wide parking enforcement.

Source: City of Salem

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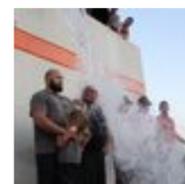
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