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Observations on the downtown Salem parking situation

I appreciate having an opportunity to share some thoughts with the Parking Group. I'm a long-time Salem-area resident (37 years) who frequently visits downtown. I've followed the recent parking policy controversies with interest, and have written quite a few posts about this subject on my HinesSight blog (www.hinesblog.com).

(1) **Anecdotal evidence.** First, I haven't noticed any real change in my ability to park downtown after the 2-hour limit was done away with. I usually park in mid-afternoon. I've enjoyed not having to move my car when I'm downtown for more than two hours. I also find downtown streets considerably more attractive without the 2-hour limit signs. If unlimited parking remains, I suggest "Feel Free" should become one of the downtown promotion slogans.

(2) **Trust is lacking.** Your job is complicated by an evident lack of trust generally in City Hall, and specifically in how City of Salem leaders handled the previous parking task force and other downtown issues.

The task force, pretty clearly, was set up to smooth the road for parking meters. It didn't have broad representation, failed to properly involve downtown small business owners, and wasn't sufficiently open and transparent in its hearings.

Downtown businesses voted to do away with the Economic Improvement District, which was a indication of a lack of confidence in how City Manager Linda Norris operated a one-person "downtown organization" after doing away with the old one.

My understanding is that you have been charged by City officials to come up with recommendations for handling downtown parking that then will be reviewed and acted upon by the same officials. You need to show this isn't a closed loop with a predetermined outcome: restoring time limits or installing parking meters.

Along that line, I'm surprised that this Parking Group doesn't include Carole Smith, likely the most knowledgeable and involved downtown business owner and resident when it comes to parking policies. This fuels a theory that "the fix is in," so to speak, and that your job is to provide some window-dressing for what City officials already have decided they want to do.

Hopefully this isn't the case.

However, not including the person who was instrumental in getting 9,000 signatures from citizens to ban downtown parking meters shows a lack of inclusiveness and acceptance of diverse opinions.

(3) Lay out options and what needs to be learned. Given the above, it would be a mistake for the Parking Group to present a rushed report to the City Council this month that is focused on any preferred long-term downtown parking policy.

What you need to do — and maybe you are actually doing this; I've just scanned one set of your minutes — is lay out various parking policy paths that could be pursued, discussing what needs to be learned about each before a reasoned wise decision about how to proceed is reached.

Citizens like me react much more favorably to “What do you prefer?” than “This is what we want to do. What do you think?” City officials have been prone to make a policy decision first, then view reaching out to the public as meaning, “Here is our idea, please take it.” This isn't the way public outreach should be done.

(4) Focus on how to improve downtown, not revenue generation. Parking experts agree on this: downtown parking policies need to be aimed at improving the ambience and attractiveness of urban cores. They aren't a way to add money to a depleted City budget.

Unfortunately, the backwards attitude of City officials was that parking meter revenues are needed to support the downtown parking garages. I can tell you that this has just about zero appeal to the citizenry, as evidenced by the resounding success of the Ban Parking Meters Downtown initiative effort.

Parking garages don't bring people downtown. A vibrant, attractive, energetic, diverse downtown brings people to an urban core. Donald Shoup, the “guru” of parking policies, says this in a book:

Suppose in this case the city creates a "parking benefit district" in which all the meter revenue is spent to pay for public amenities that can attract customers, such as cleaning the sidewalks, planting street trees, improving store facades, putting the overhead utility wires underground, and ensuring public safety.

The meter revenue will help make the business district a place where people want to be, rather than merely a place where they can park free. Spending the meter revenue to improve the area where it is collected can convince merchants and property owners to buy into the idea of market-priced curb parking.

Note: all the meter revenue goes to various forms of “streetscaping.” All. And these improvements to downtown aren't managed by a city government. The parking

meter revenue stream is handled by an independent downtown association, as has been successfully done in Pasadena.

(5) **Vision is the key.** The key to a successful downtown parking policy is a vision for the urban core that reflects the desires, values, and aspirations of the area's stakeholders: business and property owners, downtown residents, citizens of the entire area, visitors from out of town, everybody.

Without this vision, parking policies are a means in search of a goal, like walking without knowing where you want to end up. Sure, sometimes aimless wandering is fun, but this isn't appropriate when it comes to governmental policy making.

I really don't know what the current crop of City officials want downtown Salem to be. Nor do I know what downtown businesses want the area to be. This is one problem, among many, of not having a broad-based downtown organization that is able to speak for downtown.

This Parking Group obviously isn't able to do that either. This is why I urge you to proceed deliberately, not getting ahead of yourself, being willing to say "we don't know" rather than rushing to choose a particular parking policy in the absence of agreement on a coherent vision for what downtown can and should be.

Personally, I see it as other vibrant downtowns have become. Much less autocratic. Pleasantly walkable and bikeable. Filled with trees, greenery, water features, artistry, sidewalk cafes, night life.

Shoup talks about using parking meter revenues to finance bond sales that can make all this happen. I like that idea. But it would take a whole different attitude on the part of City officials and others, because, like I said, trust is lacking in both the ability and willingness of those officials to make improving downtown a priority. Hopefully this Parking Group will contribute to a fresh spirit of collaboration and creativity in bringing about the unfulfilled potential of downtown Salem.

Exclude nobody. Include everybody. Don't seek consensus. Seek good ideas.

Spend as much time as is needed to sort out the best ideas from the good, asking all of the citizenry to weigh in on the policy options. This can't be done quickly. Late last year the City Council unanimously voted to approve unlimited onstreet parking without a vote of the people. Their confidence in the correctness of this policy shows it shouldn't be undone without lots of careful thought and citizen involvement.

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