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Commission Seeks to Clarify Parking Goals

By Cathy Tyson

Although a report was issued in January of this year that outlined the current parking situation, Parking for the Downtown Core, the Planning Commission directed staff to work with the Chamber of Commerce to find more specific action oriented recommendations. Although the Parking Inventory Report, Parking Occupancy Survey and Parking Demand Assessment quantified the parking situation, they didn't provide any creative solutions.

The reports concluded that the problem is not how much parking the downtown core contains (over 5400 spots); it's where the parking is located, how accessible it is and how it's regulated. Cooperation of downtown property owners and businesses is critical to remedy the situation.

Jay Lifson, Executive Director of the Chamber, summed up the task, "Convince property owners that creating more convenient parking for their customers puts money in their pockets."

The number one recommendation in the short term is to increase the supply of public off street parking. The City purchased a small lot across from Lafayette Elementary School on Moraga Road; this lot provides forty spaces now, and an additional ten when the medical building on the property disappears. Preliminary steps are also being taken to purchase a lot near the Trader Joe's in the Happy Valley Shopping Center, arguably the worst parking lot in town, in order to accommodate employee parking and open up spaces to customers of the businesses there.

Also suggested: a cohesive parking arrangement for the center and enforcing a consistent time limit to dissuade BART parkers and shop employees. In the Shield block, City staff wants to work with owners of adjacent properties to connect their parking lots for better access and traffic flow.

In the long term the plan is to work with banks and similar businesses to allow after hours public usage of their parking lots. Already the Mercantile building allows parking on weekday evenings and all day on weekends.

"Each of the ideas from staff have merit, but what 'carrots' do we have?" asked Planning Commissioner Karen Maggio. Given a limited city budget, incentives will have to be creative.

Approximately twelve to fifteen years ago the City spoke with merchants at the Happy Valley shopping center said Niroop Srivatsa, Planning and Building Services Manager, and even paid for an engineer to draw up a new striped parking configuration. At that time they weren't interested, but perhaps the situation has gotten so bad they're open to discussion.

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