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Residents Suggest Answers to Parking Woes at Workshop

By Cathy Tyson

Reaching out to drivers, property and business owners, city leaders requested suggestions about what to do about parking in the near term and also looking out five and 10 years in the future. Attendees had a robust discussion at this first in a series of downtown parking workshops designed to gather feedback from the community to address the situation. Available parking will continue to diminish in Lafayette with the loss of 130 spaces at the privately owned lot behind Panda Express when the KB Homes condominium project breaks ground on the site, along with now two-hour maximum parking at La Fiesta Square.

This isn't the first effort to get clarity on the issue. About a year ago the Parking Ordinance Committee was formed to look in a holistic way at the parking situation that plagues Lafayette's downtown. At the Art and Wine Festival an array of comments to improve traffic and parking were received that ranged from the whimsical - a gondola to Moraga, to the practical - a parking garage on Mt. Diablo Boulevard.

"We want to know what you're thinking and get your reactions," said Parking Ordinance Committee chairperson, and planning commissioner, Tom Chastain at the recent workshop held at the Methodist church. He went over the numbers to give attendees an overall picture of the parking situation, noting 10,539 on- and off-street parking spaces in the downtown area. Unfortunately many of those are in private lots and some are hidden from view, exacerbating the problem. Chastain recalled, "Twenty years ago you could park anywhere at any time."

Focusing on the downtown core exclusively, there are 5,400 on- and off-street parking spaces, about 30 percent of the on-street spaces are metered and about half of those have a two-hour time limit. Those figures, coupled with survey results from 2007 showing that 80 percent of employees park in the same lot as their businesses, and popular shops and restaurants with more and more customers, explain the crunch.

After a brief introduction about the goals of the meeting, context and business regulations, planning and building services director Niroop Srivatsa suggested focusing discussion on managing existing parking more efficiently, with better information to drivers, ways to optimize underutilized lots, deal with employee parking, and options to create more parking.

Neighborly constructive conversations ensued at the 10 large tables; folks spoke freely, giving concrete examples of parking frustrations and traffic chokepoints along with pros, cons and logistics of each table's proposed solutions. The ad hoc table groups were asked to give their top suggestions to solve or improve parking on each time horizon at the end of the workshop.

Short term solutions were all over the map, including the elimination of BART poachers, partnering with EBMUD, a phone app showing the location of available parking, getting rid of the one street space in front of Chow, and employee permit parking that could be allowed on neighborhood streets. Medium term suggestions covered a wide range of possibilities: build a parking garage, have a shuttle or trolley running east to west along Mt. Diablo Boulevard to ferry employees from outlying parking, or have all new businesses build underground parking.

Increasing parking at BART came up several times as a potential long-term solution, building below grade or stacked parking, and providing a path under the freeway was suggested due to its central location and ability to partner with BART to possibly split the cost.

One of the short-term concepts may come to fruition - after positive response to presentations from Streetline and with significant financial incentive, the city may be ready to move forward with a smart parking system. The Foster City-based parking technology company proposed installing about 800 digital sensors in on-street parking stalls for a period of 10 years at no cost to the city. The Parking Ordinance Committee unanimously agreed that was worth pursuing.

Future workshops are planned focusing on the east and west ends of town. In case you missed this first workshop, comments and questions are still welcome at the city offices, (925) 284-1976. For more information, go to www.lovelafayette.org/downtownparking.

Reach the reporter at: cathy@lamorindaweekly.com

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