

GREAT FALLS PARKING ADVISORY COMMISSION
Minutes of March 19, 2012

Members Present: Phil Kiser, Darren Brown, Charlie Bruckner, Dave Campbell, Chuck Fulcher

Members Absent: None

Staff Present: Wendy Thomas, Phyllis Tryon

Others Present: David Gagnon and Joan Redeen

Call to Order: The Parking Advisory Commission meeting was called to order by Mr. Kiser at 3:00 p.m. in the Rainbow Room.

Meeting Minutes: Mr. Kiser asked if there were any changes to the February 21, 2012 meeting minutes. Mr. Bruckner made a motion to approve the minutes as corrected. Mr. Campbell seconded the motion, and all being in favor, the motion passed.

OLD BUSINESS

Capital Needs Assessment Update

Ms. Thomas said that last weekend the engineers from Chicago and Denver were in town and tested the parking structures. She has not yet received written results, but said the engineers noted that considering the age of the North Parking Garage, it was in remarkably good condition. She is expecting a report within the next week or two outlining needed repairs and costs. Mr. Gagnon said that the only negative report was on the stairwell towers. Mr. Kiser inquired if that was a common problem with parking structures. Mr. Gagnon explained that there is a water table underneath the downtown area which causes sinking for numerous buildings. Ms. Thomas said that drainage problems are common for parking structures due to moisture causing concrete to flake and subsequent deterioration of rebar. Salt usage at the parking structures in Great Falls is minimal, although Mr. Gagnon explained that there are specific areas where it must be used, particularly on the sixth level.

Rome, GA Update

Ms. Thomas called Becky Smith in Rome, GA to follow up on the Commission request that she touch base with Rome and report any findings. Ms. Thomas said that Rome is still in the “plan and report” stage and meters have not been reinstalled. They have a graduated citation fee and are at 90% occupancy for shops downtown, and are considering reinstalling the meters to create vehicle turnover. St. Augustine did reinstall meters in their downtown.

Mr. Kiser said that reinstalling meters may bring down the occupancy rate for Rome, and that because St. Augustine is a tourist town, the comparison doesn’t work for Great Falls. He said Rome is more like Great Falls. He said that if Rome does reinstall meters, he would like to know the impact on City parking revenue. Ms. Thomas said perhaps she could touch base again in another nine months.

In other Old Business, Mr. Campbell said a property owner, Mr. Hackett, inquired about a yearly parking pass. Ms. Redeen said she has resolved that with Mr. Hackett. Mr. Gagnon said customers can now purchase annual parking passes. Mr. Campbell asked about the reason that passes cannot be purchased for several months at a time, and Mr. Gagnon explained that the system isn’t set up to handle that arrangement, and additions to the system need to be cost effective. Use by a few customers is not cost effective. Mr. Kiser said it’s very easy to lose monthly parking passes if they are issued in advance. Mr. Gagnon said there is a 10-day renewal window for parking passes

from the 15th to the 24th of each month. Customers cannot be bumped out of their specific lot during that 10-day renewal grace period.

Ms. Thomas said she had received a cash offer from a realtor representing the Great Falls Rescue Mission this past week on Parking Lot #3. Mr. Gagnon reported that in the past month, of 24 available spaces in that lot, 9 were sold. Ms. Thomas said that last summer, the Great Falls Rescue Mission had suggested purchasing the lot for \$1.00. She received a report on comps for that lot, and the resulting figure is that the lot is worth \$3.58-\$4.60 per square foot. She said the offer was a fair price at about \$50,000 based on the comps. The lot is actually the size of two lots. Mr. Kiser noted that the lot is in very good condition.

Mr. Kiser said that he was chairman of the Parking Advisory Commission when the first parking garage was built. At that time, the Parking Advisory Commission planned out a parking district and promised Downtown property owners that the parking surface lots would not be sold. He said he has a problem selling lots for that reason, and there is never too much parking.

Mr. Bruckner said that once a lot is sold, you cannot get it back. Mr. Brown said that if the Downtown thrives, we may need that lot in the future. Mr. Brown inquired if a swap could be made, and Ms. Thomas said the Rescue Mission was willing to consider a swap. Discussion followed about an equal trade with lot spaces and condition of the lot. Mr. Kiser said this lot would be useful if the Strain Building was more used. Mr. Brown agreed. Mr. Kiser also noted that an offer of \$50,000 was "fire sale" pricing. Mr. Kiser said he would not encourage nor vote for selling the lot.

Ms. Thomas said if the Parking Advisory Commission thought the lot should be sold, the City Commission would have to agree, there would be a bid process, and the City could then decide to accept or reject the bids.

MOTION: The Parking Advisory Commission recommends that the City of Great Falls not sell Parking Lot #3.

Made by: Mr. Kiser
Seconded: Mr. Brown

VOTE: Three members of the Commission voted in favor of the motion. Mr. Campbell and Mr. Fulcher abstained from the vote. The motion passed.

There was further discussion about what type of Downtown real estate would be worth a trade.

Ms. Redeen asked about the Shop 'Till You Drop in Bed parking program, and whether Western Art Week brought any shoppers into the program. Mr. Gagnon said that data is still being gathered on Western Art Week. Otherwise, only a handful of program passes have been used.

Ms. Redeen reported on the first annual "The Art of Downtown" held on Thursday evening during Western Art Week. Seven venues hosted a total of 145 pieces of art. She said that Downtown retailers were encouraged to offer daytime specials to draw shoppers Downtown. They distributed 5,000 cards to promote shopping specials.

NEW BUSINESS

Monthly and Quarterly Revenue & Expense Reports (2/12)

Mr. Kiser asked about budget outlook for the current fiscal year. Ms. Thomas said third quarter reports will be included with information for the next meeting.

There was discussion about having comparisons to last year's figures, and whether the numbers would be relevant. Mr. Kiser said that over the past years, revenues continued to drop but that now there seems to be more vibrancy

Downtown. Mr. Campbell noted that revenues seemed to be up about 10 percent over last year on the lots and garages.

Board Comments

There was a discussion about parking promotion. Ms. Thomas explained that other cities market their parking programs by advertising availability of structured parking. Other cities also have structured parking that has been constructed in association with venues that host conventions, and they recruit conferences and have discounted evening parking structure fees. Mr. Brown inquired about signage for the outside of the parking garages.

Ms. Thomas said the City received approval from the Federal Highway Administration and from the Montana Department of Transportation to use PL Funds handed down from the Federal government and routed through the State to fund a Downtown access, parking and circulation study. Parking signage and a review of one-way streets will be included. Ms. Redeen asked if a wayfinding study will also address parking signage. Ms. Thomas said there could be some overlap if the City gets the Our Town grant. She said she is looking at multiple avenues to get directional signage covered. In light of the Downtown Master Plan, Ms. Thomas said it is important to have an overview of parking, walking, biking and driving as one component instead of piecemeal.

Mr. Brown suggested a summer promotion to offer parking in a Downtown garage and then shuttle people to the fairgrounds. Mr. Kiser noted that people want to have their vehicles with them.

Ms. Redeen said that the City's Comprehensive Planner II, Brant Birkeland, recently made a presentation on Complete Streets for the BID Board. She suggested he make that presentation to the Parking Advisory Commission. The Commission members agreed they would appreciate the opportunity. Ms. Thomas said she would ask Mr. Birkeland to give that presentation to the Commission.

Mr. Bruckner offered to attend the May meeting if his attendance was needed for a quorum.

Mr. Fulcher suggested setting some annual goals and discussed the possibility of a test zone for removing parking meters, as had been discussed at some point in the past. He noted that simply bagging meters makes people feel they cannot park in a space, so meter heads may need to be removed. Ms. Redeen suggested selling all the parking spaces on a block to retailers as Courtesy Parking with a two-hour limit. There was discussion about certain people consistently parking all day in metered spaces and moving their vehicle every couple of hours to another metered space on the same block. Ms. Redeen asked if a change in parking regulations to require people to move their vehicle to a different block after the two-hour limit would have to go through the City Commission. Ms. Thomas affirmed it would since all on-street parking changes must be approved by the City Commission.

Discussion followed about what the Commission can accomplish for the parking program in Great Falls, the possibilities of improving signage, having pedestrian districts, and changing one-way streets into two-way. Ms. Redeen noted that MDT is against any changes to one-way traffic in Great Falls and was against the Parking Study because it called for a review of one-way streets. She said that Tom Workman came to a BID Board meeting and following that, suggested the BID should be working on eliminating one-way streets and parking meters. There was further discussion on those ideas.

Ms. Thomas noted that a goal for this year is to assess the condition of the parking structures and come up with a capital facilities plan so the structures can be kept operational into the future. She said this was not a glamorous goal, but is the backbone of the parking program in Great Falls. She added that customers need a safe, lighted structure they can feel comfortable using. She stated that signage would be addressed next year due to the time involved with conducting the different studies.

Mr. Fulcher asked if an entire parking garage would need to be closed for elevator repairs. Mr. Gagnon said he thought the structure could remain open. Mr. Fulcher stated that maintenance is an on-going issue, but he would like to see one block without meters as a start to test the idea. Mr. Kiser said that in relation to the taller Downtown buildings versus the retail establishments, he thought meters could be removed where single story

buildings are located. This includes meters along the 100 block of 1st Avenue South, Central Avenue and 1st Avenue North, as well as all the meters on 2nd Avenue South, meters along the 700 and 800 blocks along 1st Avenue South, 1st Avenue North and the streets (7th and 8th Streets) going north up to 2nd Avenue North. He said meter posts could remain in place with a 2-hour parking limit sign, and violation tickets could be \$25. Patrolling would need to be done about three times a day. He said these areas don't bring in a lot of revenue with meters. He also said the 100 block of Central Avenue meters bring in good revenue and would be a great test block for meter removal for Downtown.

He said he was hopeful that the upcoming studies will indicate where one-way streets should be changed and where meters should come out. Billings is pulling out meters in areas where meter income is low. Two- or three-hour time limits will still apply. Discussion followed about \$25 tickets for time limit violations and the possibility of a test area. Ms. Thomas confirmed that the City Commission would need to approve a test. It was noted that in order for the test to show results, businesses would need to prove that meterless parking improved their business revenues. Patrolling in that area may need to be increased. Ms. Redeen suggested business owners would need to be queried for support first. There was some discussion about customer reaction to a \$25 ticket for being over a time limit.

Mr. Kiser noted that it would be a three- to five-year commitment to such a program to really have comparison data, since revenues fluctuate monthly and even yearly depending on the weather. He did note that having parking citation revenues coming into the Parking fund was the biggest positive change for parking in 30 years, and congratulated Wendy on that accomplishment. Mr. Kiser also said that if a \$25 ticket for vehicles parked over a two-hour time limit was instituted, there would be a lot of negative public comment. He proposed a block-by-block income record for this year to see where income is or is not dropping and where there should be patrolling. Then based on income figures, the next step would be to remove some meters and work with Standard Parking on patrolling issues. Mr. Campbell said that the upcoming study may reveal whether meters should be removed. Ms. Thomas stated that the study results would include recommendations. Mr. Gagnon said he would like to see the size of the metered area condensed.

On a separate topic, Ms. Thomas said a new battery vendor has moved to Great Falls and is seeking business from the Parking Division of the City. Also, Ms. Thomas has encouraged recycling of batteries rather than landfill disposal. This company, Interstate Battery, will take the batteries and recycle them at no charge to Parking. Parking replaces approximately 700 9-volt batteries twice a year.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment.

ADJOURNMENT

The next meeting is regularly scheduled for Monday, April 16. However, members of the Commission have conflicts with that date. It was agreed that the next meeting will be held on Monday, April 23, 2012. There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 4:14 p.m.