

GREAT FALLS PARKING ADVISORY COMMISSION
Minutes of January 11, 2016

The Parking Advisory Commission meeting was called to order by Chair Darren Brown at 3:02 p.m. in the Planning and Community Development Conference Room.

Members Present: Darren Brown, Chuck Fulcher, David Campbell, Kenny Volk

Members Absent: David Abbott

Staff Present: Craig Raymond, Director P&CD; Connie Rosas, Sr. Admin Asst.; Joelle Marko, Permit Tech, Sr.

Others Present: Tena Grigsby, Standard Parking; Joan Redeen, Downtown Business Improvement District; Fred Burow, City Commissioner; Greg Franczyk, Downtown Great Falls Association; Brad Livingston, Chamber of Commerce; Jenn Rowell, Great Falls Tribune; Dave Snuggs; Steve Alley

Meeting Minutes: Mr. Brown asked if there were any changes to the minutes of the October meeting. There being none, Mr. Campbell made a motion to approve those minutes. Mr. Volk seconded, and all being in favor, the motion passed.

OLD BUSINESS

There was no old business.

NEW BUSINESS

Item 1. Downtown Parking Plan

Mr. Raymond stated that Mayor Kelly and the City Commission have charged the Parking Advisory Commission (PAC) with taking a fresh look at the downtown parking program, especially due to the revenue shortfalls that the departure of Asurion/NEW have caused; however, he said that is not the only reason to re-evaluate the program. There has been a lot of testimony and discussion regarding the operation of the downtown parking program in general, from meters to the effects the current parking program has on shoppers and businesses. He said the PAC needs to evaluate the entire process, and they have been given 60 days to set up a framework of ideas on how to address the problem and what process to take. He said 60 days is a reasonable time frame, and asked if the PAC felt meeting bi-monthly would help them accomplish this task.

Mr. Volk stated he is willing to meet every two weeks and felt the PAC should meet that often until substantial progress on outlining the framework has been made; when the 60 days are up he would like to be ready and not under the gun because they have not met enough. Mr. Burow agreed and it was decided to determine the upcoming meeting schedule at the end of the PAC meeting.

Mr. Burow stated that the City Commission is open to any ideas that can be put on the table. The process will be trial and error; he realizes that the first idea may not be the answer to the problem, but if it doesn't work, they will try a different idea.

Mr. Alley said he wanted to break the ice and stated he owns property next to the South Garage. He said does not understand why there is a paid attendant in the North Garage to collect minimal amounts of money for daily or hourly parking passes. He said the City's current parking program is not working, no one is happy with it, and it does not make sense.

Mr. Alley pointed out the lack of security in the parking garage, including the lighting and wall heights. He stated he rents spaces in the garage for his tenants and has problems with vandalism. He also re-iterated the fact that having an attendant in the garage is not cost effective. He said he now gets spaces at the Comfort Inn because it is cheaper, automated, more secure, and it is heated. He proposed making a valuable investment in the garages by installing roll up doors and putting in an automated check-in system. Mr. Alley said he understood these things cost money, and is aware that the City has little money to invest in projects like these. He suggested the Downtown Business Improvement District could help defray the costs to help fix the parking problem.

Mr. Raymond said there will be a lot of public participation in upcoming months, and today he would like to focus on what the PAC would like to accomplish.

Mr. Snuggs discussed the occupancy rates for the parking lots and garages downtown, and said that the occupancy rates are very low. He expressed concern that the lots are not being utilized and stated he does not want a dime of his money going to Standard Parking, as he believes they are essentially getting paid to write tickets, which is a conflict of interest. He said the City should model its parking program after more viable programs across the country, and gave Corvallis, Oregon as an example of one such program. Mr. Snuggs discussed the high fees associated with parking in either parking garage and does not believe they are warranted; Mr. Alley agreed.

Mr. Raymond then directed the conversation back to discussing the framework the PAC needs to come up with to get solutions to the City Commission. Mr. Volk clarified with Ms. Grigsby that Standard Parking gets paid regardless of what tickets are written, and said he doesn't believe there is a conflict. He asked that they determine what the purpose of the parking program should be; a revenue generator or a way to regulate a space. He would like to see the program be solvent and not necessarily a revenue generator. Mr. Raymond stated that the revenue generation is solely for maintenance, operation and management. There was discussion on eliminating Standard Parking and having the City take over, and which option would be cheaper.

Mr. Raymond asked the group to prioritize the steps that need to be taken to come up with solutions. Costs drivers were mentioned first, followed by maintenance needs, equipment costs and salaries. The different cost types were discussed including running the garage versus the cost of the meter program. The next step was establishing the mission of the parking program, and the residential parking program was also discussed and added to the list.

Automated parking lot machines were discussed as a cost effective alternative to lot attendants; Mr. Raymond pointed out that Missoula, MT is experimenting with them with mixed results. Mr. Alley again stated the desire to remove meters from downtown Great Falls, and others agreed with him. Mr. Snuggs stated the public stays away from downtown because of the parking problems; he feels that by changing the parking program in downtown it will make downtown more attractive to consumers and businesses.

Parking meter costs and enforcement costs were discussed again. Mr. Snuggs suggested adding volunteers to enforce parking violations, as an alternative to paying for parking enforcement.

Mr. Raymond added the possibility of privatizing the parking program to the list. He stated it has been discussed before and now is the time to discuss it again. Mr. Alley disagreed and said he does not feel that is the answer and it would only make the problem worse. Instead, he said there should be a police officer downtown to enforce parking, as opposed to Standard Parking. Mr. Raymond said he would provide the cost benefit report of having Standard Parking run the parking program versus the City, and would make that information available. Mr. Alley reiterated Mr. Snuggs' point of view, saying people avoid downtown because of the parking program. Both men feel educating the public regarding parking would help this problem.

Mr. Burow agreed that the meters have their fair share of problems, however, he does not think getting rid of the parking plan completely will solve anything. Mr. Raymond agreed and added that management of the facilities will be needed no matter what the PAC decides. A universal parking pass was discussed with both support and opposition. The group agreed that turnover in front of businesses is a main objective, whether by meter enforcement or two hour limits. Meters should be available for business goers and not be monopolized for tenants, or those that work downtown. Mr. Alley said he is in favor of issuing courtesy parking passes to commercial contractors that are called to work downtown so they are not worried about getting a parking ticket; this could be a possible alternative to getting rid of meters all together. He would rather issue contractor passes than universal passes.

Funding and costs were again brought up. Mr. Alley said that if parking fines were higher and meters were removed from the equation, there would be less of an issue; he suggested making the fine high enough that people won't park illegally or overstay their limits. He said lack of fee collection from parking tickets is holding back the downtown area, and that with an increase in fees and higher turnover in front of businesses, Great Falls could have a more vibrant downtown.

Mr. Snuggs agreed with the idea of an increased fine, but stated he felt there should be different time limits in different areas of downtown, and alternatives to parking in metered spaces. It was brought up that there are currently alternatives to metered spaces in place. Mr. Snuggs went on to say people who frequent downtown will only keep coming downtown for so long if they are not taken care of and given adequate parking opportunities. He feels the two hour time limit at metered spot is not enough; two hours is not conducive to attracting people to come downtown. He supports a longer time allowance and heightened fees for time violations; education and marketing is the key to making this work. Mr. Snuggs thought each business should set their own time limits for their metered spaces.

There was discussion on the cities in Montana that are running good parking programs at this time. Ms. Redeen said Missoula has an autonomous parking committee; it is overseen by the city but can make its own decisions. Bozeman has a parking commission but still has a city staff member on board.

One of the last steps the PAC came up with for the parking plan framework was identifying immediate need for repairs in the lots, and how to pay for those repairs. The feasibility of establishing a parking district was also questioned, and the idea discussed of passing the fees onto the owners in the downtown area rather than the patrons of the businesses, i.e. parking at any suburban mall.

Mr. Brown asked Mr. Raymond for a total cost breakdown of the difference between paying a city employee and an employee of Standard Parking to do the same job. Mr. Raymond stated that breakdown could be generated. Mr. Raymond said he also had analysis from a structural engineer on what repair costs would be in relation to the parking garages. That analysis does not include new security systems or new lighting. Mr. Fulcher requested the cost breakdown of having a police officer enforce parking downtown instead of Standard Parking; Mr. Brown requested the same information.

Ms. Redeen stated the Downtown Business Improvement District (DBID) has offered to assist the police department with downtown safety issues; they have not discussed assistance regarding parking.

Meters were once again discussed. Mr Snuggs suggested that downtown businesses should pay a yearly rate for parking to make the need for meters nonexistent. There was agreement that removing the meters will be a good start to fixing the parking program. Mr. Alley stated he thinks business owners with meters in front of their businesses should be able to enforce them when needed; Mr. Snuggs and Mr. Campbell agreed.

Ms. Redeen was asked how much the DBID collects in tax revenue annually, to which she replied approximately \$200,000. She clarified that it is not a tax, but an assessment on the property, parcel and the land. The PAC discussed the option of having an assessment like that as part of the parking program.

Item 2. Budget Performance Report December 2015

Mr. Raymond stated the budget performance report was run differently than before as the year-to-date numbers are visible for 2014 and 2015. He welcomed any questions regarding items pertaining to the budget report and encouraged attendees to contact him directly if need be.

OTHER BUSINESS

The PAC decided to meet again in January. They agreed on Monday, January 25, 2016. Meeting twice per month for the next few upcoming months was agreed on by the PAC as well.

Mr. Raymond said that Mr. Snuggs submitted a new member application for the Parking Advisory Commission. The application will be forwarded to the City Manager's office, and at the next meeting the PAC will recommend or not recommend Mr. Snuggs to the City Commission.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 4:28 p.m.