

GREAT FALLS PARKING ADVISORY COMMISSION
Minutes of January 25, 2016

The Parking Advisory Commission meeting was called to order by Chair Darren Brown at 3:02 p.m. in the Missouri Room of the Civic Center.

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

Members Absent: None

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

Others Present: Joan Redeen, Downtown Business Improvement District; Tracy Houck, City Commissioner; Greg Franczyk, Downtown Great Falls Association; Jenn Rowell, Great Falls Tribune; Dave Snuggs; Bill Mintsiveris

Meeting Minutes: Mr. Brown asked if there were any changes to the minutes of the January 11th meeting. There being none, Mr. Campbell made a motion to approve those minutes. Mr. Fulcher 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 began the meeting by passing out a list of prioritized phases that were developed during the Parking Advisory Commission (PAC) meeting on January 11, 2016. He stated he added a few points to the plan for further discussion. Mr. Raymond stressed the importance of staying focused on coming up with a plan of action. He feels that developing the mission of the PAC first and foremost is most important. The discovery process will take considerable time, as far as identifying historical needs and problems with the program.

Previous parking assessments were discussed with regards to structural engineering information about the parking garages and surface lot maintenance. Mr. Raymond urged the Commission to read and sort through the assessments that have been done to develop a mission statement for the PAC. Mr. Raymond said those documents would be available at the next meeting.

The group agreed that establishing a mission should be the number one goal in developing the downtown parking plan. Mr. Campbell stated he believes the downtown parking program exists to promote commerce downtown; be convenient for shoppers and service customers and be able to set turnover for high volume areas. He does not feel the program should be responsible for lot and garage maintenance; expecting the customers and businesses of downtown to be responsible for long term maintenance of the City's assets is too much to ask. He would like to propose that the assets be transferred to Public Works. Public Works could then add to their

property assessments and have the public pay for their assets as they are owned by the entire City. He believes by then making the enforcement program self sufficient any extra revenue generated by enforcement could then be put back into better equipment, better lighting and increased signage.

Mr. Volk addressed Mr. Franczyk and Ms. Redeen and asked how the PAC would be able to get feedback from the DBID and DGFA regarding parking in downtown. Mr. Franczyk stated he would gather feedback at the next meeting for DGFA. Mr. Volk stated the more feedback the PAC can work with the better and would help clarify the mission of the PAC even further. Ms. Redeen said the DGFA would be a better outlet than the DBID to distribute information requesting feedback from downtown merchants and business owners.

Commissioner Houck recommended that the PAC formulate an electronic survey to gather feedback about the parking program. Mr. Campbell and Mr. Brown stated that at least two similar surveys had been done in the last five years. Commissioner Houck acknowledged the previous surveys, but said she would like to know whether or not people's attitudes have changed regarding the parking program. She believes that people do not mind having parking meters downtown, but they do have a problem with short time limits. Commissioner Houck would like the survey to address who is parking downtown (business owners, shoppers, retailers) and for what reasons (shopping, banking, meetings downtown). She feels the survey will gather more information than a meeting with business owners, with the survey being more accessible and practical than a sit down meeting.

Mr. Raymond said the previous surveys may have been a little too narrow in scope; a new survey could be done and the questions could be expanded. He stated when the earlier surveys were done, the PAC went to various groups to get feedback and that feedback then helped the group formulate some ideas and plans of action. He said it would be difficult to be productive if all those groups were to come to PAC meetings; the public is always welcome, but the PAC would be more productive if they came up with possible solutions and then brought them to the public. The group agreed that coming up with ideas first and then bringing them to the public is the best course of action.

Mr. Snuggs asked if the City of Great Falls had ever run the parking program itself, and it was stated the police department did at one time. He feels that the community of Great Falls should be charged with taking care of the parking program through general funds. He said that downtown is the niche of Great Falls and celebrating it as this niche will validate the costs of making it a unique place for everyone to enjoy. Mr. Raymond said that is a concept that can be explored, but looking at previous City Commissions, usage of the general fund has always been off the table; there simply was no money there. That decision would ultimately be up to the City Commission.

The parking surveys were again discussed. Commissioner Houck pointed out that since the last survey was completed, there are now new business owners in the downtown area; there has been a significant change in employers in the downtown area. Mr. Raymond suggested directly contacting some of the major employers downtown. Mr. Brown said about 100 people responded to the most recent survey.

Mr. Fulcher said there needs to be a visual change (i.e. removing the meters) to downtown before any real change can be made. He feels people see the meters and have a negative reaction; removing them will help usher in any changes to the program. He would like start with a small section of downtown and remove the meters and do a before and after survey of the parking program. He feels the results of those surveys will be a good starting point on how to address the downtown parking plan. Commissioner Houck agreed by stating she has been approached with the idea of creating meter free zones as an experiment. It could be used to show people that parking downtown worth it, even if you do have to pay. Mr. Snuggs agreed and feels it could create a ripple effect.

Advertising and way-finding were discussed and identified as a need for the parking program. Mr. Raymond said it could be considered “branding” of the parking program. Mr. Volk said that public meetings could help with that branding and advertising mission. Commissioner Houck wanted to make sure the PAC incorporates any and all feedback received from possible surveys and fact finding missions into their framework of what they are trying to accomplish. Mr. Raymond said when the past surveys were done, there was no unanimous decision on a conclusive solution. At that point in time there were limitations; the discussion before the PAC at this time is much larger in scale than in the past.

Maintenance costs were discussed again, with budget shortfalls being a known issue. With the departure of Asurion and their revenue gone, the budget shortfall is even greater. The revenue to cover maintenance and expenses for the facilities is not adequate. Mr. Raymond said there had been a request for a moderate increase in fees for the surface lots, but stated there was a general fear of asking for too much; the community might not tolerate what it would actually take to maintain the program. Mr. Brown stated these were the budget issues even before the elevator problems in the garage caused unexpected maintenance costs.

The discussion then turned back to the framework the group is working on. Commissioner Houck recommended the group identify stakeholders downtown, block by block, to bring in and educate them in what the vision for the PAC is and how to relay that message to the other downtown business owners and residents. The idea would be to create a task force amongst the stakeholders in the area to help convey the suggestions from the PAC to downtown businesses to produce feedback and other suggestions.

Commissioner Houck suggested conducting a survey at the Holiday Village Mall to see if those patrons shop downtown and not, what is their reasoning behind that decision. The results could then be shared with the owner of Holiday Village and the Great Falls Tourism Business Improvement District (GFTBID). Ms. Redeen was skeptical that the Holiday Village would allow such a survey to be conducted but it was agreed that it was worth a shot.

Mr. Brown reminded the group that there is a short timeline in which this plan needs to be outlined and presented to the City Commission. Mr. Raymond said it is only for the framework of the plan, not the actual implementation of the plan. Commissioner Houck stated Mayor Kelly is looking for a plan that the City Commission will be able to promote to the public, and Mr. Raymond likened the plan to a status report. Mr. Snuggs feels the group is being watched and the community is looking for a solution to the parking problem downtown. He feels survey or not, the meters are the problem downtown, and believes he is not alone in feeling that.

Commissioner Houck reminded Mr. Snuggs that meters help regulate parking in front of businesses and encourage turnaround for parking spaces downtown by enforcing time limits. She said there is a difference between people coming downtown to shop and feeding a meter, and people who work downtown and taking up a metered spot all day. Mr. Campbell said the presence of meters encourages people to self-enforce time limits. If there were no meters, more money would be spent on patrol and enforcement of time limits. Mr. Brown thought the idea of a pilot program for creating small, meter free zones might be something to try.

Mr. Raymond stated that the main areas of focus for this parking plan should be mission, discovery, management structure and overall improvement of the program. He said he has looked at parking programs in other cities across the country and said there are multiple programs across the country that may assist the PAC in creating a better downtown parking plan. Mr. Campbell and Mr. Brown said when comparing Great Falls to other communities, it is important to look at the types of buildings and what they house and not just populations similar to Great Falls.

Item 2: New Member Applications

Mr. Brown said that there are two applicants, Dave Snuggs and Bill Mintsiveris. He stated he would not vote on the recommendation as it would be a conflict of interest for him. Prior to voting, Mr. Raymond addressed the group and said Dave Abbott had submitted his resignation from the PAC earlier that morning. Mr. Campbell moved to recommend the applicants for appointment by the City Commission, Mr. Fulcher seconded the motion. With all voting in favor, the motion passed.

OTHER BUSINESS

The City will begin using new parking management software beginning at the end of February 2016. Mr. Raymond is optimistic that customer service and accuracy will be improved with the implementation of this new software.

Commissioner Houck expressed concern about the Smartphone app used to pay for parking meters, and whether it was working correctly. Mr. Raymond was unsure if it was an issue with the app itself or with Standard Parking and said he would look into the problem.

Mr. Volk asked about collection for parking tickets. State law says the collection process must be initiated within one year of the parking violation, otherwise the process cannot occur.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 4:05 p.m.