

City, business group tackle looming parking worries in Port

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
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<http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/022113/parkingSM.png> **Council, Improvement District consider studies to prevent downtown problems**

Growing concerns about future parking problems in downtown Port Washington have prompted the city and the Port Business Improvement District board of directors to tackle an issue they believe is key to continued redevelopment of the central business district.

The BID board, which represents downtown business and property owners, is willing to spend as much as \$10,000 on a parking study. It is currently seeking proposals from three firms, at least one of which has experience in lakefront communities, to examine parking in the central business district and recommend any needed changes.

Meanwhile, the Common Council on Wednesday was expected to commission a free downtown parking inventory and analysis from the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission.



The analysis, which won't be completed until late this year, will then be used by officials as they look at potential changes in the configuration of downtown parking lots and parking rules.

Both the city and the BID board are motivated by the changes in downtown — including the opening last fall of Duluth Trading Co. and renovations to the Boerner Mercantile Building, which is expected to open in July, as well as plans by developer Gertjan van den Broek to renovate the former M&I Bank building and Harry's Restaurant.

“There are all sorts of really good things going on downtown, and the board of directors wants to make sure the redevelopment of the city parking lots downtown is done right,” BID President Tom Didier said. “That's important to all of downtown.”

The board would like its study to be completed as soon as possible so the city can take its recommendations into consideration when redesigning the parking lot that run behind Duluth Trading Co. from Grand Avenue to Main Street, as well as other downtown parking areas, to handle needs now and in the future, Didier said.

The Duluth lot in particular is important to the city, because it is used not only by shoppers but also by the city's charter fishing fleet and its clients and tourists drawn to Rotary Park and the lakefront.

The BID board is expected to review the proposals in the next three weeks, Didier said.

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City officials said they, too, want to examine the impact of changes downtown.

“Frankly, I think this is a good year to be looking at it,” Mayor Tom Mlada said. “It coincides with so much happening downtown.

“This will take a look at parking during a summer season with Duluth (Trading Co.) open. It’s not just Duluth, though. It’s the Boerner Building, which is expected to open in July, and the Historical Society’s buildings. To have something that is inclusive of all that is important.”

The city study will include:

- An analysis of parking needs, including a summer weekend parking survey.
- An evaluation of on-street parking regulations.
- An evaluation of the parking lots, including an analysis of the metered and non-metered spaces.
- A study of the parking needs for the marina, charter fishermen and retail businesses in downtown.
- An inventory of parking and if there is an excess of parking in any area.
- A list of areas where there is a shortage of parking.
- A list of city-owned lots that aren’t needed and could be sold for development.

Parking issues have recently taken center stage in the city.

Van den Broek’s plans would add as many as 18 condominiums to downtown, as well as five commercial spaces, and he has asked the city to allow 19 permit parking spaces for the development in the Duluth lot to the east of his building.

Where those spaces will be located hasn’t been determined, city officials said.

The city is also considering a parking lot swap with Daniel Ewig, owner of the Boerner building, that would give Ewig ownership of the city-owned lot behind his building in return for the former M&I Bank drive-through property across Washington Street to the north.

The city-owned lot has 44 parking stalls and is primarily used by downtown employees, while the former drive-through currently has 44 parking places, but after the building is razed could be reconfigured to have 69 parking stalls.

An environmental assessment was conducted on the former M&I property, and the city is currently awaiting word from the Department of Natural Resources on the findings before deciding whether to approve the deal.

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Parking concerns have prompted studies in the past, City Administrator Mark Grams said.

“This comes up every 10 years or so,” he said. “I think people are worried about Gertjan’s development and the effect it will have on downtown.”

Although the city’s study won’t be done until late this year, that is ultimately a good thing because it will allow the SEWRPC to analyze parking in summer, when it is most in demand, Grams said.

“The other nine months, there are no real parking issues,” he said, noting he frequently walks downtown to survey the parking situation.

“There’s always parking,” he said. “Maybe only one or two spots on one block and four or five on the next block, but there’s parking.”

“If people think they’re going to be able to park in front of the store they’re going to, that’s not going to happen. Not in Port Washington, Cedarburg, Grafton or any city.”

Parking problems generally occur on summer weekends, not weekdays, Grams said. However, there are additional lots that open up on weekends as well, such as the parking lot at the Ozaukee County Administration Center, he said.

People may have to walk a short distance to get to the downtown stores, but there is generally parking available, he said.

Mlada said he, too, has always found parking available downtown, but added he doesn’t mind walking.

“We have to frame this issue a little differently and look at what is best for the collective good,” he said. “We want development. We want business. Everybody needs to understand that at times, that’s going to mean we won’t be able to park right in front of the building we’re going to. We may have to walk. We’re a walkable community.”

Part of the problem might be that people aren’t aware of all the parking available downtown, he said.

The city is working on a sign program that will help direct motorists to parking lots off Franklin Street, officials said.

The Police Department and Port Washington Main Street are also currently working on a parking initiative aimed at directing downtown workers to these lots instead of having them take up parking spaces on the street.

“There are more than 400 parking spaces downtown, and people need to find those most appropriate for them,” Main Street Executive Director Sara Grover said when announcing the initiative late last year.

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The initiative was spurred, in part, by the increased development in downtown, Grover said. As more shops open and more people visit those stores, the need for parking will increase as well.

“We really need to get a handle on it,” she said. “If we aren’t in the habit of parking appropriately, it’s only going to get worse.”