

Expert tells merchants more places for vehicles is not necessarily the answer

Parking isn't really about storing cars and trucks, a consultant told downtown Port Washington merchants Tuesday.

Instead, it's about access to stores and entertainment, Jason Schrieber of Nelson/Nygaard Consulting Associates said.

"Parking is about economic development in a community," Schrieber said. "Treat parking as an economic opportunity. It's not a supply issue; it's a management issue.

"Downtowns are about people, not about parking cars."

Whether Port Washington has a parking problem will be determined this summer when Nelson/Nygaard and the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission conduct a joint parking study, Schrieber told more than a dozen merchants and property owners during a kickoff meeting for the study.

"This goal is to know what is literally going on with each and every parking space in downtown," Schrieber said. "Then we'll be able to say, 'This is what's working and this is what isn't.'"

Downtown Port, he said, has a lot going for it. It has a wonderful streetscape and a nice blend of buildings, as well as a beautiful lakefront that draws people to the community.

"There's a lot of interest in these kinds of cool towns," Schrieber said. "You don't find this stuff in cities. You don't find it in suburbia."

The city's done some good things in downtown, he said, pointing to such amenities as the harborwalk, Rotary Park, stone crosswalks, benches and bike racks found along Franklin Street.

On the other hand, he said, it took him too long to find the beaches, noting the downtown is "a little disconnected" from the lakefront.

"It's like a mile away, and I'm standing on asphalt," he said, pointing out the sea of parking lots that separate the downtown from the marina.

Then there's parking, Schrieber said, pointing to a variety of signs found throughout downtown — signs that proclaimed no parking, two-hour parking, customer parking only, employee parking only and loading zones.

"These kinds of signs and regulations are clearly a sign of something that is broken,"

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Schrieber said.

Schrieber addressed five myths about parking, pointing to examples from throughout the country, including many waterfront communities:

- More parking attracts more customers.

“The key is availability,” Schrieber said. “You don’t have availability at key places in your downtown.”

Communities that have built parking garages have a plethora of parking spaces — costly spaces — but they generally find these don’t meet their needs, he said.

“Franklin and Main will still be the first place people want to park,” he said.

- Each business needs its own dedicated supply of parking.

“Sharing parking is incredibly important,” Schrieber said, noting that if parking is shared it will be used more efficiently and fewer spaces will be needed overall.

- Time limits are needed for customer turnover.

“Time limits don’t do anything but tell people, ‘You’re no longer wanted,’” Schrieber said. “Why give people a ticket to shop in your downtown?”

The best way to ensure there will be spaces available for shoppers is to charge for parking, he said, with the highest-priced spots in the most desirable areas, such as the main street, and less expensive or free parking in lots off the main drag.

Downtown employees could be given incentives to park further away from the most in-demand areas, he added.

- Parking is all about parking.

Parking is about such things as pedestrian access, since every motorist becomes a pedestrian when he leaves his vehicle, and attractive and inviting walkways that lead people throughout downtown, Schrieber said.

It’s about wayfinding signs that direct people to attractions, shopping areas, parking lots and amenities, he said, and about accommodating bikes and other transportation.

“Parking is all about convenience,” he said.

- Charging for parking will hurt business.

Many communities have found that people are willing to pay for parking when the funds go

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into downtown improvements, he said, and businesses support charges when they have a say in how the money is used.

But, he said, charge when there is a demand, such as the summertime.

"I have no idea why you're charging for parking now," he told the group. "You charge only to create availability."

Schrieber told those attending the meeting that the parking study, which is being done at the behest of Port Washington Main Street and the City of Port, will provide a wide variety of data on parking as well as an analysis of the fact, recommendation and an implementation plan.

The study should be completed around the holidays.

The issue of parking may seem daunting, Schrieber said, but it doesn't have to be.

"You'll get there if you start to fix what isn't working right now," he said. "This is an opportunity to think long term."