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Editorial

Kicking the can down the road

Council approves more studies on downtown parking problems, leaving residents waiting for relief, again

Once again, residents of downtown neighborhoods have been told to be patient about the impacts of employee parking spilling onto their streets. That's been the city's consistent refrain for years as neighborhoods have been increasingly inundated with employees working in bustling downtown offices who opt against purchasing parking permits for city lots and garages.

On Tuesday, the City Council complicated and delayed the day of reckoning by combining efforts to address the current parking problems with an evaluation of overall future development downtown and an assessment of future parking needs as more development occurs.

To city residents, it's just more of the same. The study plans adopted by the Council will likely delay any further action on residential parking issues for at least a year, probably longer.

To be sure, the dynamics of downtown parking are complicated and affected by many different variables. And some good work is being done to improve the utilization of existing city garages.

But relief for downtown residents can't wait for the financing and construction of hypothetical future parking garages years from now.

After a long discussion Tuesday, the council voted 8-1 to assess the potential parking needs for new downtown development and to look again at utilization of parking-garage space and whether construction of another garage is warranted.

While these studies will shed some light on what the city can do to provide adequate parking downtown in anticipation of more development, there is nothing in either one to provide direct relief for the neighborhoods. The only minor help came when the council narrowly approved short-term measures creating some loading zones and issuing permits for the few Professorville residents whose homes do not have any off-street parking.

As they have before, council members acknowledged that solving the long-standing parking shortage will be a challenge. Mayor Yiaway Yeh said the action is "the start of what I know is a significant undertaking."

But perhaps a more telling assessment is the varying points of view offered by business and neighborhood representatives, who have been working over the last two years with city planners to find a solution. Russ Cohen, executive director of the Downtown Business and Professional Association, expressed support for the parking study and the city's effort to solve the parking problem.

Richard Brand, who lives on Addison Avenue in Professorville, was decidedly less enthusiastic. The council should focus on parking shortages in the neighborhood, he said, rather than relating the problems in Professorville with the downtown as a whole.

Member Karen Holman picked up the neighborhood torch, calling downtown parking a "systemic problem" that needs a solution soon, adding that the city should act soon to create a residential permit-parking program in the downtown neighborhoods. She cast the lone no-vote on the plan, which she said was due to her dissatisfaction that the plans did not have a specific timeline.

Council member Greg Schmid said the staff should do more work to accurately assess the scope of the downtown parking problem. Schmid called parking a "critical" issue that will require staff resources be spent on finding out whether the city has a "systemic deficit" in parking.

The council and staff's reluctance to implement a residential parking-permit system is in part based on the fear that it will leave employees with insufficient places to park, and then deprive shoppers of easily accessible short-term parking in city lots as employees move around their cars.

Those are important concerns, but until there is 100 percent utilization of all permit-only parking spaces in city lots and garages, the city is not managing its parking program to maximum efficiency.

That's why the highest priority, as Schmid suggested, should be to focus on defining just how big a parking shortage we have. Without that knowledge, the city has no idea how many spaces it will take to meet downtown demand, present or future, and also entice downtown workers away from parking in neighborhoods.

Some overdue improvements in the permit system are coming soon in response to direction given by council in July. Just a year ago studies showed that 1,200 of the city's 3,000-plus downtown parking spaces were vacant much of the time due to an unwieldy and poorly managed permit system and to an unwillingness of employees to buy permits when they can park free in the neighborhoods. An online management system is about to be implemented that will enable the city to release permits weekly, rather than on the old quarterly schedule that increased wait times. It should improve utilization of available parking space and make it easier for employees to acquire permits.

But the patience of downtown residents is understandably running out, and the council should be including the development of a residential permit-parking system in the staff's work plan. Otherwise, a year from now we could be no closer to actually solving this problem, in spite of a large pile of consultants' reports.