

Idea Lounge IX: Downtown Parking

Exploring ways to make downtown parking affordable, accessible, profitable, and conducive to business

The Livery / Cowtown Saloon on May 12, 2009



Panelists:

John Mogensen, Downtown Developer, and Downtown Business and Property Owner

Dave Ottosen, Downtown Retailer and Restaurant Owner

Paul Gross, Harmon Solutions Group/Code Blue CEO

Brian Amundson, City of Eau Claire, Director of Public Works

Andy Miller, Downtown Parking Consultant

The ninth Idea Lounge discussed downtown parking. Panelists represented a broad array of stakeholders: downtown employer, business and building owners, the City, and an independent parking consultant.

Just like a coin, downtown parking has two-sides. One is the perception of lack of parking among the general public, the other is a recently conducted study showing that there is abundance of parking and many parking lots are underutilized. Tonight's Idea Lounge explored both. The panelists agreed that many employees abuse the system and park in the two-hour parking. The lack of enforcement only encourages this behavior and makes it difficult for business customers to find a convenient parking. Mr. Miller presented the findings of their study showing that the 13 downtown parking lots contain a total of 1,220 spaces and that six of those lots have an average occupancy of less than 30 percent. Mr. Amundson expanded on the financials of downtown parking operations, which have run a deficit for the past five years, losing \$34,254 in 2008 and \$44,020 in 2007. Enforcement seems to be at fault with a sharp decline in the last two years. Expired meter violations dropped from 1,207 in 2006 to 168 last year, while overtime parking violations decreased from 2,199 to 105 in the same period, according to the study. The lack of enforcement is likely related to staffing issues at the Police Department, which handles parking enforcement. Eau Claire has 1 community service officer enforcing downtown parking La Crosse and Appleton have 3 officers each.

The audience actively participated in discussing possible solutions. Some suggested discounted parking for low-used parking lots, 15 minute loading zones, providing free parking permits for underutilized stalls within a parking lot (those with permits would then be ticketed if parked anywhere else). Other suggested completely free parking in the ramp, parking passes provided by restaurants and businesses to their patrons, and dedicating parking stalls to an employer. Another idea was to put parking meters that would require \$1/hr in front of businesses, this would discourage locals to park there because they'd know where the "cheaper" parking spots are but would make it available parking for out-of-town visitors.

Our panelists and audience agreed that there are a lot of misconceptions about downtown parking that can be fixed by improving the wayfinding system to facilitate easier navigation. It is also important to increase general communication (marketing) of downtown parking so that travelers and residents alike know that the ramp is free at night and on the weekends.

Overall the group agreed that a two-fold approach needs to be taken: stepping up enforcement as a deterrent for people who abuse on-street spaces and cutting the cost of off-street parking as an incentive for residents to park in underused spots

Downtown Eau Claire, Inc. presented a comparison of the downtown area and the Oakwood Mall area. Many residents don't think twice about walking the equivalent of two city blocks from a parking spot to a destination inside a mall, but will complain about it in the downtown area.

When questioned about Eau Claire's comparison to other cities Mr. Miller shared that Eau Claire has the lowest revenue from parking compared to Appleton and LaCrosse. Eau Claire residents spend their money locally – Eau Claire retail sales per capita are \$18,191 compared to \$16,532 in La Crosse and \$12,078 in Appleton

An audience member shared his experience in British Columbia. After a downtown shopping trip he found a “parking ticket” on his windshield that said: “Thank you for visiting our downtown, please park more carefully on your next trip. Hope you are enjoying your day.”