

City Manager's Message – November 17, 2014

As City Manager, one of the most common questions I hear is “What’s happening with...?”. With so much happening in Birmingham, you can fill in this blank with numerous projects, programs and initiatives and we are very fortunate to be asked this question as it is an indication of the success of the City. At the same time our successes do not always come without their challenges.

For example, when people ask “What’s happening with parking?” I find there are various perspectives of what the concerns are and what the solutions should be. I thought it would be helpful to share the status of our parking system and what the plans are for the future in this regard.

The City’s parking system, which encompasses the Central Business District, includes a total of 4,820 parking spaces involving on-street parking, surface lot parking and structure parking. Users of this system include both transient parkers (those that come to shop, dine and play) and monthly permit parkers (those that park for work).

The reason the question of parking has gained much interest over this past summer is beginning in the last quarter of 2013 the demand for monthly parking permits started to increase due primarily to the economic recovery and steady growth of all businesses downtown. At present, retail occupancy is at 97%, which includes most first floor storefronts and office occupancy is at 89% which includes many second, third and fourth floors of several mixed use properties. While the occupancy of the office segment continues to grow, several existing office uses continue to renovate their current floor plans to accommodate additional employees. At this same time this summer, the Park Street parking structure had two floors closed for regular maintenance, which removed approximately 250 parking spaces from the system. Over the summer of 2014, the growth trend of the retail and office segments continued to expand to the point where the demand for monthly parking permits exceed the allotment provided. The number of monthly parking permits is regulated in the parking structures to provide a balance for both the transient and monthly permit users. With all this occurring, the utilization of the parking system is currently at about 80% overall – not full, but getting close. This accounts for transient visitors, as well as, both employees with and without monthly parking permits.

To address this issue, the City had established an ad hoc parking study committee in June, 2014 to review current demands and consider future demands given the development potential with our overlay zoning regulations. This committee is expected to have a final report with recommendations in early 2015. In conjunction with a focus on the future, shorter term efforts have been underway to expand parking capacity in the more near term. These efforts have included the addition of 13 on-street parking spaces in areas not previous designated for parking on Oakland and Chester. Another short term initiative is to provide valet parking downtown during the holiday months. Offered Thursdays through Saturdays from Black Friday through December 20, the service will be provided by In-House Valet from 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. Shoppers will drop their vehicles off for just \$4 in two convenient locations: Henrietta



Joseph A. Valentine, City Manager

at West Maple (next to Roots), and Old Woodward at Hamilton Row, in front of Comerica Bank. As an added convenience, shoppers may call the valet service before they pick up their vehicle to ensure it is ready when they return to the valet stand. Shoppers and diners can also look forward to a brand new offering in Birmingham – *free* valet service during two upcoming special events: Small Business Saturday on November 29 from 10 a.m. – 6 p.m., and during the All Wrapped Up In Birmingham Ladies Night Out event on Thursday, December 11 from 6 p.m. – 8 p.m. Valet parking won't add capacity, but it will add convenience during these high use periods. In addition, arrangements are being discussed with property owners of surface lots on private property and large employers for arrangements to provide off-site shuttling to further expand capacity until a more permanent solution is finalized.

Any long term solution for parking will not only involve the Central Business District, but also the Triangle District, which is defined by Maple to the north, Woodward to the west and Adams to the east, given future plans for development in this vibrant and growing area as well. This area was specifically acknowledged by Andres Duany, the City's urban planning consultant, as a critical location for parking during his visit to Birmingham back in May.

An expansion of our parking facilities will help to address current and future needs, but the potential costs associated with new parking facilities will be substantial. Multiple funding strategies will need to be considered regardless whether the addition of new facilities is solely a city project or a public private partnership.

As I stated earlier, success does not come without its challenges. Birmingham's success of the downtown and related business districts may require some additional investment to sustain it. This would be an investment in the future of our city. Ample parking is vital to this effort as we plan and prepare for how to best deal with the demands for the future.

I look forward to continuing to share more about Birmingham's key issues in the future.