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NEWS LOCAL

Ideas generated to curb downtown parking deficit

By Elaine Della-Mattia, Sault Star
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All options are being weighed before a recommendation is brought to council about the future of downtown parking lots in Sault Ste. Marie.

Two open houses held last week to receive feedback on the two-hour free parking in municipal parking lots was very well attended, said Don Scott, manager of transit and parking.

He estimates that about 60 people attended the public input session sharing suggestions and engaging in dialogue.

Most of the participants were downtown business owners, he said.

In addition, an online survey netted about 1,700 responses, more than the committee anticipated.

“All options are still on the table,” Scott said. “We were there to discuss parking and how to keep the downtown vibrant and moving forward and we want the parking division to be a self-sufficient department of the city and we're looking at ways to do that.”

The issue of transforming the 10 'free' downtown parking lots into paid lots was raised in November 2015 when city council passed a resolution penned by Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker calling for a review of the free municipal parking lots.

He argues that the city is losing money on what could be a revenue-neutral lot.

Shoemaker said he was very impressed with the feedback and the ideas generated on how the city can make up the parking lot cost deficit.

“I was really surprised by the openness to some of the ideas. What the businesses were saying was that they don't want the potential customer to pay (the costs of parking) but there were other ways to do that,” Shoemaker said.

Some offered to reinstate the parking lot levy to downtown businesses which was eliminated in 2000. Others suggested that a small fee be added to major event tickets in the downtown area to generate maintenance costs for the parking lots.

Shoemaker said that another idea suggested that the city eliminate enforcement costs and meters on Queen Street and in lots and give business owners the right to ticket people.

The Downtown Association and its members say losing the free parking is creating another barrier for downtown businesses and puts them on unequal footing from their uptown counterparts.

Shoemaker counters that uptown business owners have purchased their own lots or properties and are subsidizing the downtown lots through their tax dollars.

Scott admits that it was concerned business owners made up the majority of those who attended the open house.

While they're worried about losing business as a result of a parking issue, the city is grappling with the \$400,000 annual price tag to upkeep, light and offer enforcement in the lots and along Queen Street.

Scott said the 10 municipal parking lots in the downtown area hold 885 vehicles.

Based on the 2016 data compiled by the city, most are about 60% occupied on weekdays, with some lots up to an 80% occupancy rate.

Some downtown employees may stay in the lots for the entire day with annual permits selling for \$45 and monthly permits selling for \$44 a month.

Scott said the city's long term plan was to always convert the lots into a pay-and-display system, or something similar because the lots could generate some revenue for the city.


The recent study shows that the city could collect about \$200,000 in annual revenue from the lots.

“I believe we will find a solution that will work for everyone,” Scott said. “We want to make sure the downtown is operating properly, and successful. We're here to work with the downtown core.”


Shoemaker agreed.

He said that once the information is compiled by the consultant, he says there may be a number of options or a combination of ways or tools that cold be used to cover the deficit costs.

“I was very pleased with the ideas and the creativity that was shown at the open house,” he said.



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