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NEWS LOCAL

City to modernize 'free' municipal parking lots

By Elaine Della-Mattia, Sault Star
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Municipal parking lots will remain 'free' for a two-hour limit but changes are coming that will require users to pay for additional parking time or face heftier fines.

In addition, council will also deliberate a motion by Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker asking staff to develop a proposal to charge municipal employees for parking at all city-owned buildings, including the Civic Centre.

If city council approves the recommendation to tweak the current free municipal parking lot system, a public-private partnership will also be sought to examine the potential of leasing 13 pay and display machines for 2018.

That would mean motorists who want to park their vehicles in the municipal lots for more than two hours can purchase additional parking time for \$1.25 per hour, up to a \$5 maximum for any of the 10 municipal parking lots.

It's also recommended city council adapt recommendations from HEMSON Consulting Ltd., on user fees, thus increasing future rates for parking fine infractions.

The city will also examine ways to implement a mobile payment solution where customers can pay for municipal parking with the use of a mobile phone, tablet or computer.

As a result of consultations with downtown stakeholders, the city will also reconfigure the parking layout in the Bingham lot to improve traffic flow for motorists and pedestrians and repurpose the north-east corner of the Brock/Albert parking lot to include a 4,250 square foot multi use court for the community.

It's also recommended that the parking review committee reconvene yearly to explore the possibility for a pilot project that would see gates used to control entry and access to an existing municipal lot and review the enhancements to parking enforcement.

The recommendations are as a result of a resolution passed in 2015 that asked city council to examine municipal parking operations with the objective of reducing the costs of maintaining the local lots.

In total, the city maintains 974 parking spaces in 10 municipal lots, in addition to the 346 metered on-street parking spaces.

A parking demand survey was conducted and statistics show that the 10 lots average a 36 per cent occupancy over the past three years.

Queenstown, east of Dennis Street, had an average occupancy rate of 27 per cent for the 248 on-street parking spaces and city centre, west of Dennis Street, had an average occupancy rate of just eight per cent for its 98 on-street parking spaces.

An online parking survey, public information sessions and comments by emails were received.

Not surprisingly, the majority of online survey participants want to see the free two hour parking maintained. Downtown business owners also want the free parking to continue as they compete with malls who also have free parking and believe it is critical to the vitality of the downtown.

The review committee agreed the two-hour free parking should be maintained, but pay and display machines should be added to the lots and those wanting to stay longer than two hours can pay for the additional time.

Recommendations to improve the flow through the Bingham parking lot were recommended as a result of a traffic volume survey which was completed for a week last summer. The proposal will improve the local landscape and make the area easier to navigate for both pedestrians and motorists, the report to council states.

Repurposing the under-utilized area of the Brock-Albert streets parking lot will also support the parks and recreation master plan to create accessible and inclusive areas and develop free, accessible recreational opportunities with a multi-sport court in the downtown area. It also aids downtown revitalization.

The report also shows council that costs of maintaining the downtown free parking lots has also decreased over the past few years.

In 2014, costs to operate parking enforcement were pegged at \$229,000 but have declined steadily to \$109,478 in 2016. That cost reduction is primarily due to employees retiring without being replaced and the work being reassigned.

The city calculates that the two hour free parking represents about \$175,000 in revenue.

Shoemaker notes in his motion that other employers, including Algoma University, Sault College, SAH, OLG and Group Health Centre charge employees for parking and the city should collect revenue wherever possible to offset tax increases.

Monday's council meeting begins at 4:30 p.m.

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