

# Parking Issue in the Sault's Downtown. General Consensus is to Park It.

By **Lynne Brown** - February 9, 2017



If parking in the downtown district of Sault Ste. Marie is something you are passionate about, you are not alone. The first of two Public Information Sessions on the subject, held Wednesday, Feb. 8th, 2017, generated a good crowd. The Russ Ramsay Room of the Civic Centre was full of people vested in nurturing a downtown core that does not involve paid parking, where none currently exists.



Eight municipal parking lots in The Sault's downtown area, are presently, a free option, limited to two hours during the day. One thing was for certain at the 4 – 5 pm session. There is little appetite in Sault Ste. Marie for tampering with free parking.



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Small business owners, shoppers, concerned citizens, residents from the downtown area, non-profit organizations and their clients, were well represented in the robust discussion that followed a presentation by consultant, Vince Mauceri, Transforward Consulting Group.

Based out of Burlington, Ontario, Transforward Consulting specializes in Business Case Analysis and Strategic Planning with emphasis on Parking, Transit and Transportation.

In practice for over 30 years, and having worked in transportation both public and private sectors, Mr. Mauceri was contracted by the city of Sault Ste. Marie to take a look at the big picture as it relates to the downtown district and parking.

"I'm not here to make a decision. I'm here to share information about what other municipalities are doing and to take a look at the overall umbrella of parking in The Sault's downtown." said Vince Mauceri.

Mr. Mauceri stated that the online public survey which was recently conducted, had a higher than average rate of completion, with 450 responses being collected. The survey took place in mid – late January 2017, and closed on Jan. 31st.

The online survey generated data from local residents and business owners based on the parameters of the questions posed. The public information sessions were held to further drill down on public parking in the Sault's downtown district.

'Since 2005, the two-hour free downtown parking program has had an annual cost of \$190,000. Costs associated with providing municipal parking include lighting, signs, landscaping, snow and litter removal, line painting, enforcement, insurance, and pavement re-surfacing.

To eliminate this cost, the City is considering a move to a full user-pay downtown parking program similar to the existing on-street pay parking in Sault Ste. Marie and used by other northern and southern Ontario municipalities.' ([saultstemarie.ca](http://saultstemarie.ca))

Community members, including business owners, were, to a large degree, opposed to imposing further parking fees for shoppers and out-of-town visitors to the downtown.

"We need to get behind small businesses." shared a participant, who is a small business owner. "Putting pressure on an already shrinking economy will have detrimental effects on our downtown. Further to this, we need to be looking at accessibility for people with mobility issues; designated parking spots for people who use wheelchairs, for example."

Bob Wilding, President, Board of Directors, United Way SSM & District stated, "The United Way is moving to the downtown area. One of the reasons we are moving is to enhance access for the clients we serve. Putting added pressure on people living in poverty, who will be coming to our new location, is not something we can afford to do."

Rory Ring, CEO Chamber of commerce stated that small business is the key to economic vibrancy in the downtown area. "Small business accounts for well over 1,000 people in the Sault's downtown. Parking, and costs associated with it, should be considered as an investment in businesses on the part of the City of Sault Ste. Marie."

Marnie Stone, Stone's Office Supply shared, "I believe that if we remove free parking downtown it will be absolutely detrimental. I would like to see an enhanced free parking policy. We should be looking at ways to bring people to the downtown, not encouraging them to stay home or shop online."

The majority of participants at the public information session echoed those sentiments.

Kristi Cistaro, long-time business owner and member of the Downtown Association's Board of Directors said, "I have a hard time seeing how this is not going to directly hurt my business, and drive my customers to competitors on Great Northern Rd, where parking at big box stores is free. I was looking at expanding my business. This is the type of thing that will encourage me to not look at expansion, and take a hard look at whether long-term feasibility to grow my business downtown is even an option."

Shabby Motley owner Ashleigh Sauve shared, "Many of my customers are seniors, who are coming down for coffee and yarn. If they are asked to start paying for parking in a nearby lot, I fear that they will stop coming to my downtown business."

Lori Nowitski, City Meat Market, said that she has been doing informal surveys with customers who are shopping downtown, including at her business on the issue of parking. "Time and time again, people are saying that they would stop shopping downtown. 70% or so, of our business is with elderly persons who could little afford increases to an already stretched budget."

Comments from attendees at the information session like 'that's the last nail in the coffin' were shared.

"The parking levy, to small businesses located in the downtown, (East Street to Dennis Street) was eliminated back in 2005." shared Mr. Don McConnell, City of Sault Ste. Marie's Director of Planning.

"This was intended, at the time, to support businesses, that were struggling. The parking levy was only applied to those businesses who didn't have enough parking at their location. Municipal Council at that time wanted to help the downtown merchants, and that is why the parking levy was eliminated entirely."

"It would be helpful to the (parking) committee if we had a few options to consider to generate income." stated Mr. McConnell. "A concept that works where we (City of SSM) do not eliminate the free two hour parking option."

Some ideas were shared, including "a uniform token-style parking framework across the board", as one individual stated.

Frank Fata, Municipal Councilor spoke with saultononline. "There was some great discussion here tonight. Timing is important, and the timing may not be right for us to be considering asking residents to begin paying for parking in downtown lots. It's a tough situation. We've been trying to keep downtown alive and active. Our downtown includes the station mall, the waterfront, and is very unique. It is part of what makes us special as a community and as an extraordinary place to visit."

Mr. Don Scott, Manager Parking, City of Sault Ste. Marie, told saultononline, "190,000 is a cost centre. After we apply our revenues to our cost centre, there is \$190,000 remaining. That cost is applied to a general tax levy. We are here to learn about what the community is recommending. We intend to take those recommendations to Council, reflective of the community at large."

Mr. Scott stated that the Parking Committee is looking to March 20th, as the target date for sharing a report to municipal council on the matter of parking in the city's downtown. Stay tuned.

### **Lynne Brown**

Algoma writer, enjoys roadtrips. Has written for special editions #TBay #ChronicleJournal. In the late 80's, Lynne worked for #AutoTrader, in rural Southwestern Ont. Trudging through farmers' fields for a picture of a 56 Dodge Custom Royale was considered a very good day. Special interests include issues relating to faith, rural, elders, seniors, travel, history, community development. Motto: #whattheworldneedsnowislovesweetlove @dlynnebrown

