

The Real Definition(s) of a “Parking Problem”

December has now passed, and with it the crowds of shoppers out finding just the right gifts for their friends and loved ones. For those of you in the retail trades, it’s such an important part of your year, and I hope you had a wonderful (and profitable!) 2016 season.

The flip side of this time of year is that there are a lot more people out – and therefore – a lot more people parking in our shopping districts. I was reminded of this myself when I went to my “secret” parking area at Paseo Nuevo a few weeks ago (OK, not really secret, just the basement area by the Macy’s entrance), and it was completely full. As I groused under my breath about not being able to find a spot, I had to catch myself. I was complaining for all the wrong reasons.

While I may have had a legitimate gripe about having a hard time finding parking, I’ve said for years that a parking problem is not being able to find a spot – it’s having no problem finding a spot! Empty parking means no one shopping. It means no one at our restaurants. It means no one at our businesses. It means the wheels of commerce have ground to a halt.

Look no further than cities across our region who would give anything to have the traffic we have in our downtown. To have the thousands of shoppers and diners and theater-goers. To have our “parking problem”.

But there is another definition of a parking problem, and it’s one businesses in the Funk Zone are currently experiencing. Trying to meet the parking requirements our City Zoning rules are placing on them.

Let’s start by stipulating a few things. The Funk Zone is a unique, redeveloping area of our community that has quickly become a focal point for many younger Santa Barbarans as well as many of our visitors from around the world. It offers many things – just not a lot of easily identifiable parking options.

Given the demographics of those frequenting the Funk Zone, it is safe to say that there are fewer people using their cars to access the area, choosing instead to walk, bike, take the train, or use Uber or Lyft or a cab. And when they come, they are rarely going to just one place. If you are going wine tasting, you are generally hitting many of the wine tasting rooms in the Funk Zone, not just one.

In general then, these businesses have fewer parking needs, but the same parking requirements. And to add insult to injury, while they are in an urban area, there is nothing either in place or proposed that would allow them to work together through the City to create shared parking opportunities like we see in the Downtown core.

So when a new business is proposed in the Funk Zone, and they go to the City for their permits, they are forced to search through the Funk Zone finding parking they can pay to lock up in order to meet the requirements – parking they may or may not necessarily need.

Now, I know there are those who think the parking problem in the Funk Zone is that it is hard to find a spot to park your car, but it seems pretty clear to me that the real parking problem is the one we’ve put on businesses in the Funk Zone through our old school, inflexible parking rules.

So what are we to do, you may ask? I think it is time for the City, and the community, to look at a parking benefit district for the Funk Zone. Let's build a program that will take existing City lots, like the lot behind the Visitor Center at Cabrillo and Garden, and dedicate those lots to the Funk Zone. We can use the parking revenues generated off these dedicated lots, assessments made on the businesses and/or properties in the district and the bonding capacity of the Waterfront District to transform these lots into structures similar to those our old Redevelopment Agency built in the Downtown core. In this manner, we solve the problem in a fair and equitable way, regardless of whether your business is downtown, La Cumbre or the Funk Zone.

And in the interim, since this will take a while, we need to try something really unique. We need to discuss waiving the parking requirements in the Funk Zone. We can do this as a zoning overlay, with a one or two year trial period, with the goal of assessing its impacts on the community. Regardless, it needs to be done while we are creating the parking benefit district so that we don't stifle the entrepreneurial growth that is occurring in this important new part of our community.

Parking problems may be in the eye of the beholder, but to me, they really exist when we assess the problem based on its community-wide impacts, not whether I can park my car when and where I want. It's past time that we get serious about addressing our own self-imposed parking problem in the Funk Zone, and the Chamber stands ready to work with businesses across the community as we encourage the City to take this step.

Happy New Year!