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Changes in downtown expected

Study 'finds' 108 parking spaces

By MICHAEL J. KELLY

SUMMIT — A downtown study funded by the Special Improvement District has found 108 new on-street parking spaces which could help alleviate the city's chronic parking shortage.

The new parking spaces suggested by the consultants could come from diagonal parking on Union Place, removal of obsolete bus stops, reduction in loading zones, and the elimination of 'No Parking' zones on parts of Maple Street, DeForest Avenue and elsewhere.

"If we could get half of these, it would be like adding another whole parking lot downtown...with just a bucket of paint," said Joseph Steiner, president of Summit Downtown Inc. which manages the Special Improvement District.

The parking recommendations are presently being reviewed by the Summit Police Department to determine safety and compliance with state regulations. Input also will be sought from landlords, merchants and from the entire community before any requests are submitted to Common Council for actual change.

"This is the start of a process, nothing is in concrete, said Mr. Steiner, emphasizing the report's preliminary nature.

The report is the first tangible result of the creation of the downtown Special Improvement District which permitted a special tax surcharge on downtown property owners to finance improvement projects. To soothe opponents at the time, Summit Downtown Inc. pledged that the first project of the SID would be an exhaustive study of downtown needs.

The \$63,000 study was conducted over the past six months by three consultants: The Community Advocates; Project for Public Spaces, Inc.; and Abeles Philips Preiss and Shapiro, Inc. Their study included interviews with merchants, employees, shoppers and commuters; a questionnaire distributed at public events such as First Night; time lapse photography of key downtown locations, and a slide show comparing Summit to downtowns across the U.S. and abroad.

The results, Mr. Steiner said, was the portrait of a well-loved but basically bland Summit downtown.

"We go on vacation to see these things, when we could have them at home as well," Mr. Steiner said.

Some ideas suggested by the consultants included:

- Construction of a round-about in front of the train station at Union Place and Beechwood Road. Time lapse photography revealed many motorists already use the intersection for U-turns.

- Conversion of Beechwood Road to a one-lane, one-way traffic flow toward the train station. Its broad, pedestrian friendly sidewalks would supplement the Summit Promenade, which currently is the only downtown area people can comfortably congregate outdoors.

- Widening of the sidewalks at virtually every intersection downtown which would increase pedestrian safety due to shorter crosswalks, slow traffic speeds, and create space for benches, kiosks and sidewalk cafes.

- Better signage downtown, to welcome visitors to the shopping areas and to attractively direct them to destinations such as parking or the train station.

The second half of the study includes a market analysis which will be presented to Summit Downtown Inc. in July.

Phase II of the ongoing project will be aimed at developing public awareness. Mr. Steiner said any improvements must be endorsed by the downtown property owners who will have to pay for them,

as well as accepted by the public who will use them. In coming months he expects to make the presentation to every community group that asks. Phase II will end, he envisions, with a community wide meeting for everyone to give their feedback to Common Council.

Phase III would involve implementation of the report.

"What is the cost? We don't know," said Mr. Steiner. "But is this a concept that we should start talking to landlords and other folks about? Absolutely."

The Community Advocates in cooperation with Project for Public Spaces, Inc. and Abeles Philips Preiss and Shapiro, Inc. is undertaking Summit's first Economic Master Plan in over 30 years.



Don Smartt and The Community Advocates