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Phillip Kushlan: Raising Downtown parking rates is a good thing - really

READER'S VIEW: DOWNTOWN PARKING

At a time of increasing highway congestion and rising fuel costs, most drivers in Boise will not greet the suggestion of raising some public parking rates as good news. Yet that is really the message behind the recommendations of the Downtown Public Parking Reinvestment Program.

The recommendations are the result of hard work by the Parking Advisory Committee (PAC), made up of many members of the Downtown community: business professionals, property owners, shopkeepers and others.

The PAC originally met in 2003 and made several recommendations to CCDC, Boise's redevelopment agency, which owns and operates the garages. Among them were the "First Hour Free" program and a policy to evaluate fees on a four-year cycle.

The PAC reconvened in 2008 and re-evaluated the system, resulting in the Parking Reinvestment Program and its recommendations.

The proposed program and all supporting documents can be reviewed at:

www.ccdcboise.com/PAC.

Parking fees in the public garages do not cover the full cost of parking. (If they did, the private sector would build more of them.)

In Boise, the 3,000 spaces in the public garages were built by CCDC using bonds backed by expected property tax income. Parking fees only cover operation and basic maintenance. This makes sense - the public subsidizes the building of garages to get cars off the street and create the urban vitality we all enjoy, while the user pays for the cost of operating the system.

The parking garages in Downtown Boise have been a huge success. In Downtown, you can park once and walk to many shopping, working and living destinations without navigating a sea of parking lots. This makes Downtown a desirable destination and a good place for business: annual Downtown sales have nearly doubled since 2003.

Parking rates have not kept up, however, and deferred maintenance needs to be addressed. Raising some of the rates means the automobile user - not the public - underwrites the operating cost of garage parking.

When the garages were built (dating back to 1976) they were high-quality facilities, but few significant upgrades have been implemented, and major maintenance has been put off for cost reasons. Some of the facilities are showing their age.

Noting the disturbing trend toward chronic deterioration in the nation's infrastructure, the PAC has recommended careful reinvestment in the Downtown garage system that ranges from minimum stewardship obligations to "best-in-class" system upgrades.

To pay for the reinvestment, the PAC recommends some rate increases, but insists on two things: the first hour should remain free, and the daily maximum charge of \$12 should not increase. The First Hour Free program instituted in 2004 has been an unqualified success.

Last year there were a half million more garage visits than in 2004. The visitors are staying longer: the average length of stay went from 2 to 3 hours. Visitors are spending more, nearly double, as noted previously.

Of course, the first hour free comes at a cost. To preserve the First Hour Free incentive, the PAC recommends raising the hourly rate to \$2.50 and the monthly rates to \$100, and again hold them steady for four years. This increase is expected to generate the \$1 million per year that system maintenance and improvements require.

The good news again? The First Hour Free program remains intact, encouraging more people to visit downtown. The successful Downtown garages get long-overdue maintenance as well as improvements that make it easier and faster to use them. And the users of the system pay for its operation, allowing public funds to go to other investments in downtown - workforce housing, green development and public transportation are just three examples - that benefit everyone.

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