

Sep 15 2021 4:10 pm

Economic Development Committee of the Fitchburg City Council

Tuesday, September 14, 2020

Meeting Minutes

Members Present:

Councilor Andrew Van Hazinga, *Chair*
Councilor Marcus DiNatale
Councilor Marisa Fleming
Councilor Samantha Squailia
Councilor Bernard Schultz (remotely)

Others Present:

Councilor Paul Beauchemin (*Ward 2*)
Tom Skwierawski, *Executive Director of Planning & Community Development*
Anne Cervantes, *City Treasurer & Parking Clerk*
Calvin Brooks, *City Auditor*

Chairman Van Hazinga called the meeting to order at 8:10 p.m.

The Committee has one item on the agenda:

- 161-21. ORDERED THAT: The City of Fitchburg hereby approves the expenditure of funds from the MassDevelopment TDI Challenge Grant Program in the approximate amount of \$45,000.00 (FORTY-FIVE THOUSAND AND 00/100 DOLLARS) for the purpose of said grant, which is to target technological enhancements in the City's downtown parking system and implement accompanying signage changes.

Mr. Skwierawski summarized the recommended changes to the downtown parking system based on the parking study completed by Walker Consultants in December 2019. The results of this study were previously presented to the Committee in 2020. This study showed significant excess availability of parking on Main Street and Boulder Drive with usage of available spaces consistently below 30%. It also considered the redevelopment of the new Fitchburg Theater and City Hall, and has been used to develop plans for accounting for parking demand by these uses.

The intent of the recommended changes is to use the availability of parking as a tool to support businesses and development in the downtown area. Longer-term parking will be encouraged to use garages and street spaces will be used for short-term parking. The recommended changes to the parking system are summarized in two phases:

1. Removal of parking meters & institution of free time-limited free on-street parking (aligned with existing time limits). License Plate Reader (LPR) technology will be used to enforce time limits for on-street parking as well as in the City garages. The garages will have "fixed LPR" cameras located in the entrance and exits, and the on-street parking will be monitored through vehicle-mounted "mobile LPR" systems.

2. An availability benchmark will be set (85% of spaces utilized is an industry standard) at which point fees will be charged as a way to encourage sufficient availability of parking. This will require installation of parking kiosks in various locations downtown.

The grant considered by the committee will be used with other funds to pay for the purchase and installation of LPR technology used for enforcement as well as appropriate signage for Phase I or the recommended changes. The LPR system will be monitored by a contracted vendor at an estimated recurring cost of about \$7,000 per year. Data collected through the LPR readers will be used to measure parking usage/availability at regular intervals to appropriately manage the system.

Elimination of the parking meters and implementation of Phase I will require additional action by the City Council and change(s) to the City Code. However, this won't be done until the new LPR equipment and signage is in place. Otherwise, there will be no enforcement mechanism in place to manage downtown parking. Acceptance of this grant does require the City's good faith commitment to follow through on the proposed changes. The funds from MassDevelopment cannot be used for other purposes.

Several councilors raised questions about how LPR enforcement will work, including:

- How is data collected by LPR readers stored? For how long? Is it purged regularly? Is it used for other purposes, such as other law enforcement efforts? Will the data be used by the contractor for other purposes, such as sold to other users? *It was noted that the data is stored in the cloud by Ventek, the technology provider, and that there is the ability to collect law enforcement data, but it was the City's understanding that this suite of services was not part of the package being purchased. These items will be addressed in more detail at next City Council meeting.*
- How is it handled if a car moves to another location on the street? *Depends on how far away, but similar to how it is enforced now.*
- Is there an appeal process for tickets issued through LPR enforcement? *Yes, same as now.*
- How will parking fines be structured/priced? *Same as now.*
- Will there be different rates for seniors? *No, same as now.*
- Will there be assistance to technology-limited individuals to use the system? *Yes, acknowledge there will be a learning curve and clerks at City Hall will be available to assist in purchasing parking permits for garages. This is a limited factor in Phase I, as use of free, time-limited parking does not require use of technology to register.*

It was acknowledged that the Council has to decide whether to move forward with the recommended parking changes before funds are spent buying equipment, removing meters, and installing new signage. While some councilors have remaining questions on the LPR technology they want answered before casting final approval, it is the consensus of most of the councilors to recommend approval in committee, and then discuss further with the full Council. This mirrors

the action of the Finance Committee on the related Order 160-21, which was also recommended for approval pending further discussion with the full council.

Vote: A motion was made by Councilor Fleming to **approve Order 161-20**, seconded by Councilor Schultz. The motion passed 4-1 with Councilor Squailia in opposition.

Vote: Chairman Van Hazinga motioned that the following non-binding language be included in the committee's report to show MassDevelopment the City's commitment to comply with the requirements of the grant (again, subject to further discussion and approval by the full council):

“The Committee recognizes that this grant carries with it the conditions to remove the parking meters on Main Street and institute time-limited, free parking (which will require a future vote of the City Council) as well as set a parking availability goal for the re-establishment of parking fees.

In taking this vote, the Committee endorses the recommendation to move from metered parking to time-limited free parking (aligned with existing time limits) following the installation of required enforcement equipment. This vote also serves as an endorsement of a parking availability goal of 85%, which includes the progress benchmark of 65%, at which point the City Council will consider whether on and off-street parking should move to a paid model of enforcement.”

The motion was seconded by Councilor Squailia and passed unanimously (5-0).

Councilor DiNatale motioned to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Councilor Squailia. The motion passed by unanimous consent and the Economic Development Committee of the City Council adjourned at approximately 9:10 pm.