

Business districts could see parking improvements

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Parking meters near Watertown's business districts often don't work. Some streets have metered parking spots, while others don't. Many areas lack signs explaining the town's parking regulations.

"No one knows why one street has parking meters and one doesn't," Town Councilor Vincent Piccirilli told the Watertown TAB. "I get a lot of complaints from people about illogical parking schemes."

Watertown's parking issues extend beyond the meters. An ongoing parking survey indicates more than half of drivers who searched for parking in Coolidge Square left without finding a spot. The survey found a similar situation in Watertown Square.

Beyond an inconvenience for drivers, these issues could lead to lost customers for area businesses.

To address concerns, Watertown officials are developing a parking management plan for Watertown and Coolidge squares. The town has hired a traffic and parking consultant to lead the project.

"It is really critical from an economic development standpoint that we provide an adequate number of spaces so the businesses can survive," Piccirilli said.

Parking inventory

The project grew out of discussions about what to do with the town's aging parking meters, said Laura Wiener, Watertown's senior transportation planner. Rather than just replace the meters, the town wanted to understand parking in Watertown and explore improvements, Wiener said.

Town officials have hired the Boston-based consultant Stantec. Project leader Ralph DeNisco said his team is taking a comprehensive look at both squares, including the number of spots, their locations, how often spots are used and the different parking regulations.

In November 2018, DeNisco and his team spent time in both business districts, taking an inventory of weekday and weekend parking.

Watertown Square has a total of 1,507 parking spaces, according to Stantec's findings. About 82 percent is off-street parking, including private lots. The Watertown Square area comprises Main Street and adjacent streets, from Green Street to areas north and east of Watertown Square Park.

The analysis found noon was the peak parking time on a typical weekday, with 60 percent of the parking spots in use. On a typical weekend, the peak was at 11 a.m., with 50 percent in use.

Coolidge Square has 1,369 parking spots, split almost evenly between on- and off-street parking. This area includes Mount Auburn Street from Langdon Avenue to the Coolidge Playground, plus streets south to Nicholls Avenue and north to Maplewood Avenue.

The analysis found that peak weekday parking here occurred between noon and 2 p.m., with 40 percent of the spots in use. On a typical weekend, the peak was at 11 a.m., with 45 percent in use.

There were up to 10 different parking regulations in both squares. Some of the regulations included two-hour on-street parking, 10-hour off-street parking, unmetered and unregulated areas, private lots, handicap parking and residential-only spots.

Public feedback

Another key component of the initiative involves public feedback from residents, employees and anyone who visits Watertown. DeNisco said more than 1,000 people had responded to an online survey through mid-January. The survey will remain open until mid-February.

The public also had an opportunity to provide feedback at drop-in open houses held on Jan. 23 and 24 at the Watertown Free Public Library. Town officials and representatives from Stantec were available to answer questions about the project and talk about the preliminary findings.

The Watertown TAB spoke with several residents attending the Jan. 24 open house. Some of their suggestions included:

- Providing shuttles so that people do not have to drive to the business districts.
- Improving signs explaining parking regulations.
- Upgrading the parking meter technology, including adding options to pay by credit card or phone.
- Incorporating bicycle safety as part of the parking plan.
- Improving pedestrian safety and encouraging people to walk in these districts.

Sharon Schumack and Susan Flint are members of the group Watertown for All Ages. They wanted to ensure that the town chooses solutions that consider the concerns of older adults.

“I think the technology that’s comfortable for younger people to use can be intimidating for older people,” Flint said. “Planners need to keep that in mind.”

Watertown currently offers a senior parking pass, an option Nancy Hammett would like to keep. The pass allows seniors to park in several areas of Watertown, and she said it was easier for her than feeding quarters into meters.

Several people would like to see private parking made available to the public.

“There’s a lot of private parking that seems to be underutilized,” said Watertown resident David Stokes. “Is there a way for us to consider utilizing the parking that exists in a different way that is beneficial?”

DeNisco said his team will evaluate the parking inventory and public feedback, making recommendations to the town in March or April.

The timing of the parking plan corresponds with the Mount Auburn Street reconstruction and renovations in Watertown Square, Piccirilli said. He added that improvements could begin within the next year or two.

“We’re looking forward to moving forward and solving some problems,” Piccirilli said. “The sooner we can start on this, the better.”

DeNisco and Piccirilli both encouraged more people – residents, employees and visitors – to take the online survey. It will remain open until mid-February and can be found at watertownparkingsurvey.com.