

Article published Sep 4, 2007

Central snarl Balance transportation, business interests

The central business district of any city is crucial to that community in so many ways. Its commercial well-being is often a cornerstone of the city's overall economic health, and its ambience is directly connected to its prosperity and sense of itself.

A downtown area that's difficult to get to because parking is a headache and traffic is congested certainly won't thrive. And when downtown and its immediately adjacent areas don't flourish, the whole community suffers.

Downtown parking matters most to people who spend a lot of time downtown. In reality it's an even bigger issue because of the broader economic and cultural implications.

That's why a comprehensive solution, which includes modest parking-garage fee increases, is essential. But modest increases certainly are not like the ones now proposed, which in some cases are doubled.

It's even more important, however, that local and state governments and private businesses ramp up incentives for people to use alternative means of transportation. One such example: The PARC (Park-and-Ride Community) pilot project, which begins today.

A project of Greenovation, within the Knight Creative Communities Initiative, it's designed to encourage more StarMetro riders among people who live in the North Thomasville Road area, and is a terrific example of cooperation among public officials, private citizens and several local businesses.

City commissioners last Wednesday were right to delay a vote on proposed fee increases for Kleman Plaza and the Eastside Garage on Calhoun Street. It was obvious that downtown businesses, who were understandably concerned about the financial impact, weren't sufficiently involved in planning.

When the issue does come back for a vote, commissioners would be wise to take a more holistic approach - perhaps one that phases in graduated increases over a year or two while the city continues to improve StarMetro transit service, particularly within the central district.

Merchants and others with an interest in the vibrancy of the downtown area understandably are worried about any changes that would discourage residents and tourists from strolling, sightseeing and spending.

As parking and traffic continue to worsen downtown, however, the significance of higher fees at the city's two garages will pale in comparison. Who'll want to drive downtown if it entails crawling through traffic and fighting for a parking space?

Encouraging more drivers to drive less and walk, ride or use a bus more is no simple task. We love our cars, and the independence they provide.

But as our city grows, it's important that more attention is paid to keeping the central business district of the state capital easily accessible, and pleasant and safe for pedestrians. That demands a balanced approach to transportation planning - one that's promotes both prosperity *and* access.