

Businesses see parking plan as problem - Feb. 17, 2012

Posted by Sentry Editor at 2/17/2012 2:33 PM 

Categories: uncategorized

By Michael J. Tobin

Staff Writer

Parking is a heated topic of discussion among business owners in the Knightville area, as diagonal parking spots between the rotary and C Street will be gone, replaced by parallel parking on both sides of Ocean Street.

"This would be devastating to my business, and businesses around me," said Tom Smaha, owner of Legion Square Market.

The Ocean Street project, a \$1.44 million utility upgrade that includes sewer separation and catch basin removal, new gas mains, new water mains, sidewalk improvements, landscape enhancements and paving, will force the reconstruction of 1,300 feet of Cottage Road and Ocean Street from April to September.

"I want to go on the record as a long-standing businessman in this community of being totally opposed to this," Smaha said at a South Portland City Council workshop last Monday night.

"The market has been at 101 Ocean St. for 70 years and people who shop at Smaha's aren't likely to parallel park when pull-in parking is available up the street at Hannaford, and other pull-in spots are just too far away for my customers."

Smaha said people aren't going to carry their groceries two or three blocks.

"It's not going to happen," he said.

The current parking configuration has been in place since the late 1990s, when the Casco Bay Bridge replaced the old Million Dollar Bridge, altering traffic patterns in Knightville. Those who spoke Monday were not anxious to see a return to previous parking alignments.

Business owners were also upset they hadn't been given more notice of parking changes. Many claimed to have not been aware of the spot-shuffling plan until late January.

"I had been approached about the upcoming road work generally, but never specifically about changes in parking," said Michael Drinan, owner of real estate and property management firm Drinan Properties. "To the best of my knowledge, neither had any other members of the Waterfront Market Association, a group of businesses aimed at promoting Knightville and Mill Creek. The very nature of parking is going to change - this could be the death knell for some businesses down there."

Councilors, sympathetic to the business owners' concerns, gave little indication they are willing to delay the project's planned start this spring, but did indicate a willingness to examine parking more closely.

"The project is attractive because it gets done in one construction season what could normally take years," Councilor Tom Coward said. "The merchants are not happy with what's happening and I think we should look at it. But that doesn't mean we should hold the thing up."

Councilors Rosemarie De Angelis and Tom Blake also said they think more conversations could be held about the business owners' parking concerns, but Mayor Patti Smith said one vision for the neighborhood could mean less of a need for parking, as Knightville orients itself for pedestrian, bicycle and public transportation traffic.

"I support this project because it re-imagines Knightville," Smith said.

Jim Higgins, owner of Higgins Carpet One, calls it "pie in the sky bad thinking" that some councilors have a vision for the Knightville community to become a pedestrian, walking and shopping area.

"This is a suburban area, not an urban area," Higgins said. "We all own automobiles. In 21 years of business at this location, I've had only three customers who have either walked or rode their bike to my store to buy carpet."

Business owners who spoke at the workshop praised the project itself, which began last year with new sidewalks on Ocean Street by Mill Creek Park, construction of the Mill Creek Transit Hub and renovation to the city hall parking lot. Last year's project also included elimination of several storm water catch basins. That work will continue on Cottage Road and upper Ocean Street this year, as the city filters runoff from the sewer system, which has caused the system to overflow during heavy rains. This year's sewer separation project is designed to divert rainwater out of the sewers and directly into Casco Bay. Even with a major reduction of combined sewer overflow points in recent years - from more than 20 to six - more than 14 million gallons of raw sewage spills into Casco Bay each year, because the sewer system cannot always handle storm water surges.

Following a water main break in front of the post office last summer, the city decided that, as long as the streets were dug up, Unitol should get a chance to upgrade its gas lines, while the Portland Water District would replace its 8-inch water mains, some of which date to 1892.

However, while those details have been known for months, business owners say they were shocked to learn of a new wrinkle following a Jan. 23 council workshop.

"That was the first we'd heard of plans to reconfigure downtown parking spaces," Higgins said. "There was no committee process or input from the business owners or residents."

Dan Riley, senior project manager for Westbrook-based Sebago Technics, the firm hired to oversee the work, said although parking spaces will be reshuffled, there would be no net loss of spots in the district. Moreover, he added, the change would make room for motorcycles and scooters.

"The angled spots can't remain because they are three feet too short by current city ordinances," Riley said. "Pulling in the sidewalks to make room would be a poor design aesthetic, as well as an irritant to snow removal."

Riley said that parking spots lost by the change merely move across the street, or, at the most, no more than 800 feet up Cottage Street from their present locations.

De Angelis had little sympathy for Smaha and others that their customers "can't parallel park." She also shot down a suggestion that the city build a parking lot in the Knightville area, directing drivers instead to the side streets.

"It is not the city's responsibility to buy parking lots for businesses," De Angelis said.

Smaha has posted a petition against the parking changes, currently signed by more than 150 local people, stating that although they support the overall goals, "removing and or replacing the diagonal parking spaces will be harmful to the businesses and residents located in the area.

Smaha hopes this petition will get the city of South Portland to work directly with area residents and business owners to consider options and alternatives to the removal of the diagonal parking spaces.

"And to cease its work on this particular piece of the overall project until city officials, area residents and business owners have has an opportunity to work together to consider and discuss other options," Smaha said.

City Manager Jim Gailey said any delay to the proposed April 15 start date of construction could cost the city up to \$675,000 in state and federal grants, if that pushed completion of the project into 2013. "There's no guarantee that money would be available next year," Gailey said.

Drinan said people are taken aback by the complete lack of communication and outreach by the city.

"It seems to me this project is being driven by grant money that has a time frame," Drinan said. "This has been presented to us as a fait accompli. We just hope that, moving forward, the city will consider anything it can do to help our businesses. We can survive short term, but we're very concerned about the long-term impact this will have."

Amy Alward, who runs the Allstate insurance branch at 95 Ocean St., said she is worried the parking changes will put an end to what has been a booming business.

"My business is growing exponentially," Alward said. "I don't want to be forced to move out of this area, especially because I provide jobs, benefits and high salaries for this area."

Drinan said the city is enacting some changes that could very well drive out some longstanding businesses.

"This parking issue and the lack of communication is really unusual for this city because there was no meaningful dialogue with the merchants," said Bob O'Brien, a vice president at Noyes, Hall & Allen insurance. "That really caught people by surprise. We didn't know this was coming. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here today."

O'Brien said he knows this project is a big deal for the city, understands the value of the project itself and is looking forward to the end product.

Like O'Brien, Melissa Coriaty, owner of Verbena, is looking forward to all the great changes the (Ocean Street) project will bring to the area when it's completed.

"I am focusing on the positive," Coriaty said. "I just want to stay open and hope the construction and parking changes don't effect my business."

Staff Writer Michael J. Tobin can be reached at 282-4337, ext. 219.