Paying for Progress

Norris: Parking revenue could be used as catalyst for downtown improvements

The price of parking during big events downtown might be going up, and developers there could soon face new regulations aimed at improving the look and feel of the area. Those are two potentially controversial issues to be hashed out as officials move forward with a long-term “action plan” for Lafayette’s Central Business District, Downtown Development Authority CEO Nathan Norris said.

“This is the first really new plan since 1989,” Norris said during a Monday presentation at the Acadiana Press Club. “Our downtown has radically changed in the past 25 years.”

One change is the demand for parking, which was less of an issue in the 1980s before a downtown revitalization brought new parks, museums, bars, restaurants and retail offerings.

The downtown plan calls for tapping the rising demand to bring in more parking revenue, and then using the money to help pay for additional parking, better lighting and other improvements.

“The whole idea is that you can improve the overall experience with parking revenue,” Norris said.

The details have yet to be worked out and any changes would need the approval of the City-Parish Council, because downtown parking is now managed by city-parish government.

In general, the plan is to start charging for metered spaces at night and on weekends — meters are now checked only Monday through Friday until 6 p.m. — and to charge a premium for the best parking spots when crowds are heavy downtown.

The latter strategy is sometimes referred to as demand-responsive pricing or dynamic pricing, letting the free market determine parking rates based on supply and demand.

Some large cities in the U.S. have already gone that route.

“Parking is like a utility,” Norris said.

The change would require new technology, such as sensors to detect when a parking space is open.

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Advocate staff photos by BRAD BOWIE
Parking meters line Garfield Street in downtown Lafayette as seen on Monday morning. The Downtown Development Authority is proposing changes in fees for metered parking downtown.

PARKING

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Norris said he also envisions new meters that, unlike the current coin-operated ones, accept payment via credit card and smartphone.

Other changes in the offing for downtown aim at improving what the plan dubs the "character" of the place.

Norris said DDA is exploring new codes to guide, and sometimes mandate, the location of parking areas, the use of awnings, the number of windows and doors a business has facing the main street and whether windows are clear or tinted.

The plan calls for, among other things, pushing parking away from public view, encouraging clear windows and doors facing the street, limiting building height to ensure sunlight gets through to the street, encouraging outdoor dining and limiting the speed on downtown streets to make them more pedestrian friendly.

The goal is to create a space where people can see and interact with lots of other people, whether on the street or inside a building, Norris said.

"That's what humans are most interested in: other humans," he said.

Norris said the proposed downtown codes, unlike conventional zoning, are more concerned with how buildings interact with other buildings and people rather than what the type of business is being conducted inside.

Norris said he expects some pushback from property owners and developers who might object to new design guidelines, particularly considering that government codes addressing such things as the placement of windows and doors are unusual for the area.

"We are only saying in this teeny, tiny area, character does matter," Norris said.

The City-Parish Council would need to approve any new zoning laws or codes for downtown.