

What You Think

Written by Mark Shaffer
Tuesday, 18 January 2011 14:31



Lowcountry Weekly readers share their opinions on Beaufort's parking conundrum

Your comments continue to stream in following our story *Parking Pains* in the January 5th edition. We wanted to know how you felt about the situation, and apparently feelings are pretty strong. The idea was simply to get some dialogue going and while that's certainly happened, we were a bit surprised at how much time, thought and effort went into some of these emails. The vast majority of you favor free parking downtown with a three-hour limit on Bay Street. There were some interesting alternatives shared as well, most of them based on experiences in places with similar challenges. And not all were limited to parking. Indeed, parking seemed to be a springboard to address other issues and concerns.

One email seems to coalesce most of these things. Mary Jane's lived in Beaufort for a couple of years and sees things from a different perspective:

"Mark, your article about the parking very clearly described one particular problem. It's incredible to me that such obvious public rejection of this new system has not already resulted in a change. Clearly Beaufort depends on tourism and there is definitely a great deal of competition for this income. As you noted, however, there are other issues. I understand that there has been a great resistance among the business community to any chain businesses locating on Bay Street. I think this is unfortunate. A mixture of local and nationally known businesses would, I believe, add some energy and panache to an area that looks a bit downtrodden. I can think of a number of coastal business communities (Mystic, Connecticut,

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for example) which are composed primarily of local shops, but which also have a Chico's or an Ann Taylor.

Another issue is the general look of the street.□□ Some of the buildings on Bay Street have peeling paint and the street, as a whole, looks rundown.□ There are some palm trees along the street. It would be great if more were planted and there were white lights on the trunks of palm trees all year long.□ In general, something needs to be done to make this very small area look more festive and inviting.

It is very odd to me that Beaufort, which has so many expensive, upscale developments nearby, cannot support a spiffy, exciting, attractive commercial street.□ Where do these people go to shop?□ It isn't only tourists who might want to spend time and money downtown.□ Beaufort has so much going for it in terms of history and natural beauty, if only it could present a more sophisticated and inviting commercial center



r it would add immeasurably to its ability to draw both tourists and new residents who are accustomed to a much higher level of options.”

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Linda lives on St. Helena and writes that she and her husband “*very rarely go into town because of the parking situation. We travel to Bluffton, Hilton Head or Savannah to shop as these areas are more visitor-friendly. Surely we are not the only people who feel this way. Something needs to be done before downtown becomes a ghost town.*”

Like a number of others, Linda believes the key to cooling the parking controversy and heating up commerce is an off-site garage and shuttle service.

“Having a shuttle service provided to downtown would help eliminate congestion traffic and the need for the kiosks. Beaufort wants tourists but we are currently driving them away. Surely seeing so many businesses close that have been in the downtown area for many, many years, must [indicate] that something is drastically wrong. Are those who run the city so caught up in the old days and ways that they can’t see what is happening before their very eyes?”

To be able to really enjoy our beautiful city and to see what it has to offer takes more time than three hours. There are many people who come here to visit our city who will never get back to do it again. We need to make it tourist and local friendly. Word of mouth is the biggest free advertisement we have.”

Geralene in Bluffton goes so far as to come up with a whole new means of alternate transportation for the downtown area. She recalls living in Key West where “*parking was very limited, but tourists understood it was a walking town.*

However, there were pedi-cabs – a bicycle rickshaw for two passengers – if a person wanted to

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ride somewhere. There was also the Conch train (same outfit as Savannah) and hotels had shuttle busses. Pedi-cabs would be a good solution to having to park several blocks away.

At the Bluffton Farmers Market people just park a few blocks away and walk – it's part of the fun. People need to realize downtown Beaufort is an experience – not like going to a mall.

Having an outside firm hand out parking tickets is so unfriendly as you noted in the article.

The pedi-cabs would be a nice business for someone!"

Which finally brings us to the question of those day-glo orange envelopes and Lanier Parking Solutions (a.k.a. Park Beaufort), the firm the city's hired to dispense them. I have yet to receive a single positive comment in regard to the way this firm conducts business downtown. Not one. I find this disturbing. In fact, to put it very mildly, the overwhelming consensus indicates that Lanier has not inspired a significant amount of good will - just the opposite, in fact. What most of you termed as "overly aggressive" ticketing seems to be at the center of this. Perhaps, though, it is the nature of the beast. How many people really get a kick out of paying a parking fine?

As I write this, at least half a dozen visitors to our downtown office over the last few days have begun conversations with exasperated tales of parking woes and confrontations with "Parking Ambassadors." I've heard too many people complain about being ticketed as their time expired and more than a few relate stories of being ticketed while standing at the kiosks. These are not isolated or infrequent occurrences. I'm not suggesting the rules go un-enforced. But I firmly believe – as do most of you who wrote in – that the wrong message is being sent at the worst possible time:

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Mark,

I received a parking ticket yesterday in downtown Beaufort.

I live in Connecticut, visited Beaufort and fell in love with the area, community and lovely downtown. Several years ago I built a winter home in Dataw. I really enjoyed shopping and dining downtown. I bring my friends to shop and have a bit of lunch when they visit.

On January 6th, I received a parking ticket. I was shopping with my college age son, spending money. I forgot about how much time I had left on the meter. We wandered and talked, something that we have little time for as he moves into his own life. Beaufort has that charm about it. I returned to my car to find a N.Y.C. style ticket.

Keep downtown inviting. I was sad to see so many empty shops. Downtown is a destination for many people seeking the long lost sense of Main Street shopping. I paid the ticket, but Beaufort business will be hurt!

Sincerely,

Cathy

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The Dude abides

Which brings me to my single favorite idea from what I'll call our "Stream of Conscientiousness." This reader (let's call him "Donnie") suggests that concerned citizens should create an "awareness campaign" featuring an image of Jeff Bridges as "The Dude" from the Coen Brothers cult film classic *The Big Lebowski*. The Dude holds up a bright orange parking citation with the quote from the film in bold:

This aggression will not stand

.

I can already see the bumper stickers. To quote another cult classic, "I'd buy that for a dollar."

Email your comments and suggestions to Mark Shaffer at backyardtourist@gmail.com

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