

## **Parking crisis -- In parts of Baltimore, cars outnumber spots 2-to-1**

By Stephen Janis, *Baltimore Sun*, October 20, 2010

“There just isn’t any space on the street,” said City Councilman Bill Cole, whose 11th district encompasses some of the city’s most parking-challenged neighborhoods. “It’s a great building, a great project, but my concern is that 600 new residents will need parking.”

In fact, the latest planned building in Mt. Vernon will push the neighborhood well beyond the tipping point if developers don’t commit to building a sizable number of off-street parking spaces.

In an area where the number of resident-owned vehicles already outnumber on-street parking spaces more than two-to-one, 600 new potential motorists could cause a veritable parking meltdown.

“The community has concerns too,” Cole said.

Five months ago, developers of the Professional Arts Building in Mt. Vernon were embroiled in a dispute with the city’s Parking Authority after neighbors complained the influx of new renters was sucking up too many spaces.

The city initially denied the right to purchase permits to roughly half of the development’s occupants, a move that left some residents of the recently opened building without a legal right to park on the street for more than two hours at a time.

But that decision was changed after the city’s law department ruled the residents had a legal right to the permits, according to Al Barry, a planning consultant for the building’s owners.

The owners also entered into an agreement with the city to review the parking situation once the number of parking permits reaches 50, Barry said.

“It’s always a challenge, parking issues takes up a lot of my time,” said Cole, whose councilmanic district spans parts of parking-space-starved Federal Hill as well as Mt. Vernon.

“There is a uniquely suburban expectation that you have a right to park in front of your home,” he said. “But there are not enough parking spaces.”

So what can be done?

City officials can't manufacture more parking slots for contemporary automobiles in neighborhoods built when the buggy whip was still in vogue and where the average row home in Federal Hill spans all of 16 feet across, shorter than the modern SUV.

Furthermore, the city's Residential Parking Program, which issues permits for on street parking to some 35,000 city residents in 41 so-called "areas" scattered throughout the city, is stretched to the limit.

Thus Cole thinks it's time to come up with new solutions before development in some of the city's most attractive neighborhoods grinds to a halt.

"It's a long-term problem we have to address now," he declared.

## **FEDERAL HILL**

To get a sense a just how desperate the on-street parking shortage is in some neighborhoods, consider Residential Parking Area 9, home to longtime Federal Hill Resident Paul Robinson.

The media consultant and Federal Hill Neighborhood Association President is well acquainted with the daunting math that makes parking a major headache for residents in his neighborhood that sits between Charles and Hanover Streets in Federal Hill.

As recently as 2009 his company Preferred Parking Management operated the city's residential parking online program that allowed residents to obtain permits simply by logging onto a computer. Thus Robinson knows the real numbers, and they stink.

"We have about 800 on-street parking spaces in Area 9," Robinson said.

"Double that number for residential permits and add 1,500 visitor passes and you could conceivably have 3,000 cars competing for 800 spaces on any given day," he said, adding: "It's crazy."

The consequence of a paucity of on-street parking in Federal Hill is often manifested in dollars and cents.

"It has a direct impact on home values here," said Robinson. "Ask any real estate agent and they will tell you the number one issue for buyers is parking."

Part of the problem, Robinson thinks, is the parsing of responsibilities of administration and enforcement of residential parking restrictions, duties divided between the city's Parking Authority, which issues permits, and the city's Department of Transportation, which handles enforcement.

"Most of the people responsible for running the program don't live in the city," he said. "So they don't really understand what we're dealing with here."

The lack of coordination leads to abuse, making a bad situation worse.

Recently Robinson did a so-called manual audit of the database containing addresses registered in Area 9 for a residential permit through the online parking program. He discovered hundreds of registrants using an address that didn't exist, according to city records.

"We found 194 non-existent addresses, to be exact," he said.

The bad addresses were the result of user input error; however it is not yet clear how many of these bad addresses translated into undeserving or even fraudulent resident parking passes.

"Abuse is a big problem," Robinson explained.

But parking permit abuse is not the only problem preventing the city from making sure there is adequate parking for city residents.

"I don't think anybody connects the dots before it's too late," says Otterbein resident Robert Harkum of the reluctance of zoning officials to force developers to add enough off street spaces when seeking approval to develop or rehab apartment buildings.

Living just a few blocks from Camden yards, the former president of the Residential Parking Program Advisory Board said the desire to foster development has prompted many projects to get the green light from zoning officials without providing for adequate off-street spaces.

"A lot of variances are granted to someone who adds units but not parking, which zoning law requires," said Harkum, who resigned in frustration two years ago over lax zoning enforcement.

City zoning law stipulates that any modification to a residential dwelling, such as converting a single-family row home into a multi-unit apartment building for example, requires that an additional off-street parking be built for each new unit.

"The system can work if they follow the law," said Harkum.

But even when off-street space is made available, he said, suburban transplants accustomed to large driveways and who pay steep property taxes feel entitled to on-street parking,

"I've had people tell me they can't use their garage because their son moved and they've been storing his belongings for 10 years," he laments. "You wouldn't believe the things I've heard."

## **SOLUTIONS?**

One solution for solving the neighborhood's parking woes that Harkum supported during his tenure as president of the advisory board is what's known as a "fee-in-lieu" plan.

Tested successfully in other cities like Philadelphia, a "fee-in-lieu" plan requires charges of up to \$10,000 per new unit built if the developer does not add an off-street parking space, with the money put into a fund to build more off-street parking in neighborhoods where space is tight.

"It's something I think could work here," said Harkum. "It's a good way to insure there is adequate space ... We just could not make it happen."

Converting surface lots that charge motorists by the hour could also provide opportunity to add off-street spaces, particularly in Mt. Vernon, where the pay by the hour lots sit adjacent to the neighborhood's hottest night clubs.

"The surface lots are the least efficient use of space in an urban environment," said Cole, who is also an advocate of improved public transportation like the new, free Charm City Circulator. The bus has proved popular, particularly for Mt. Vernon residents who work downtown.

"You see people lined up in the morning to take the Circulator downtown," he said. "Better public transportation is the key."

But the only real long-term solution may be the lifestyle embraced by Texas transplant Terry Sheppard and his wife Deborah Thomas.

The former Los Angeles Times foreign desk editor and Rice University administrator moved to Otterbein with his wife shortly after retiring in 2007.

Living within walking distance of Camden Yards, the Inner Harbor, the Maryland Area Regional Commuter (MARC) Train and the city's Light Rail, the couple decided to abandon the automobile altogether.

"The true cost of owning even the most economical vehicle is \$6,000 to \$47,000 a year," said Sheppard as he took a break from rehabbing his home. "People don't realize it."

But the big plus for Sheppard is the exercise he gets walking to his favorite neighborhood restaurants, along with the sense of connection to the community that comes with relying on one's feet to get around.

"I just like to walk," he said. "And my neighbors like me better because I'm not taking a parking space," he added with a smile.