



Illustration by Rich Hauck.

FREE PARKING?

No, it's not Monopoly. It's Harrisburg. | BY LAWRENCE BINDA

To butcher a famous literary phrase: “Let us now praise HBG famous men (and women).” In my column last month, I took to task certain Harrisburg officials who seem determined to strangle downtown’s housing renaissance in its infancy.

But I feel I also should offer praise where it’s due, and nowhere is it due more than with the complicated, difficult issue of downtown parking.

Yes, parking.

Four years ago, Harrisburg’s financial recovery plan went into effect, and, to save itself from insolvency, even bankruptcy, the city entered into a convoluted, 40-year deal to lease out its cash-rich parking system.

Harrisburg surrendered control of its garages, rates, fees, ticketing, enforcement—the whole shebang. From then on, city officials, it seemed, would be able to do little more than smile and accept it as the new operator hiked rates and tightened enforcement.

But that’s not what happened at all.

Oh, sure, the rate hikes happened—street-parking fees doubled—with the adverse effect on downtown business that everyone predicted, especially for the coveted happy hour/dinner business of downtown’s many restaurants and bars. But city officials proved far more resilient and imaginative than I would have thought possible, given their seemingly powerless position.

First, Mayor Eric Papenfuss made a risky bet that reducing street parking rates from \$3 to \$2 per hour from 5 to 7 p.m. would not lead to any loss for Park Harrisburg. With the support of City Council, the administration pledged to compensate the system operator for any lost revenue. The scheme worked. The city never had to shell out a cent, and the rate for these hours has remained at \$2 since.

Next, the city reached a deal with its mobile parking application provider for four free parking hours on Saturday by using the code “LUVHGB.” It then convinced Park Harrisburg to allow 15 minutes of free parking in downtown’s many loading zones, helping to address the problem of people avoiding downtown businesses for quick trips to pick up a sandwich or buy something at the hardware store.

Then, last month, City Council agreed to the grandest stroke yet. Under a new plan, the city will put up some money (\$110,000 from a fund that Park Harrisburg already owes the city) to make parking free after 5 p.m. throughout much of downtown.

Now, this idea didn’t start with the city. The credit really goes to the Harrisburg Downtown Improvement District, which got both the city and Dauphin County on board and is splitting the cost with them.

But there you go: free parking after 5 p.m., four hours free on Saturday and free loading zone parking for those who want to zip in and zip out—all implemented from a position of utter powerlessness. That deserves praise.

Several years ago, I took flack from some readers after I had the audacity to say a few nice things about the new parking regime. I said that I liked the freshly installed digital meters, which actually took credit cards, not just quarters. Also, with better enforcement, I finally could find parking downtown, previously impossible since, with little fear of getting a ticket, people would never move their cars. I didn’t even mind (too much) the admittedly ridiculous \$3 hourly rate if that was the price for helping the city get back on its feet financially.

However, I realize now that mine was a minority opinion. Most people in and around Harrisburg had grown used to cheap (or free) parking, seemed to regard it as their birthright, and nothing was going to change their minds. Even reducing the rate to \$2 an hour didn’t bring back after-work drinkers and diners in their former numbers.

Honestly, I lay part of the blame on the business owners themselves, who, with a few exceptions, seem utterly allergic to the concepts of marketing and community engagement. The same goes for Park Harrisburg and its parent, SP+, which have never bothered to try to educate people about the system and why and how to use it.

Do most folks even understand that downtown parking costs just \$2 an hour after 5 p.m., is free after 7 p.m., is free on Sunday and, with the mobile app, is basically for free on Saturday? For the most part, I don’t think so. Heck, it seems that, almost every day, I have to tell someone that Harrisburg no longer runs the parking system—four years after the city relinquished control of it.

This lack of outreach has allowed the problem to fester, giving people (especially suburbanites) another reason to hate on Harrisburg. It fed and affirmed an existing prejudice against the city, which sustained education and encouragement might have overcome. But that wasn’t done.

But maybe “free” will work. Maybe two bucks an hour is all that stands between suburbanites and a great meal or night out. Maybe any cost—a penny, a nickel, a dollar—is too much for folks accustomed to complimentary parking in vast surface lots. In time, we’ll see. We’ll also see if people actually get the message.

In any case, here’s to inventive, responsible local government. Harrisburg officials took a problem they had no business solving, in a system they had no right to change. And they helped solve it and change it. Praiseworthy indeed. **B**

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