

sitelines

BY STEVE COHLMAYER

Downtown land is wasted on parking

NOT long ago, I attended a lecture on cities at a national convention held in Winnipeg. The speaker was staying at the Hotel Fort Garry, and reported that he had wandered out of the hotel the night before to see if he could find something interesting to see or do.

He walked north for several blocks, then gave up hope.

His comment was, "It was so bad I didn't know whether to get drunk or commit suicide — so I came back to the hotel and went to bed."

Of course, Winnipeggers know that our city is not all that bad.

The speaker had ventured forth in the wrong direction, without a knowledgeable guide. Such an experience could happen in any city.

However, his fruitless excursion did not occur in some obscure part of the city, but in our downtown, where a visitor could reasonably expect things of interest might be found.

The black eye of our downtown is the amount of surface parking we have, and the lack of buildings and uses where this surface parking occurs. Some causes of our oversupply of surface parking have been discussed previously in this space, and I would rather explore current opportunities for healing than beat the dead horse of past mistakes.

Extensive parking lots are more than an esthetic problem. Surface parking revenues are attractive enough that they raise land values to a point where small- and medium-scale development is financially impossible.

Taxes on parking lands are relatively low because there are limited land improvements to the properties. And the true cost of allowing our downtown lands to remain "fallow" is immense. Land that is well serviced and close to all kinds of activities is unavailable for moderate-scale development, so the economic spin-off that comes with real development either does not occur, or occurs in our more suburban locations. The central city pays the true long-term costs of ex-urban development: Loss of central-city taxes, unused infrastructure and loss of tourism.

We are in a unique position in 2004 to take some decisive actions to rectify this problem.

A new downtown zoning bylaw is nearing adoption.

Before it is adopted, it will be possible to remove the currently existing right to develop surface parking on any downtown lands, and to require re-zoning or variance procedures for any future surface parking. Our city fathers are in a position to act on this immediately.

The rule of thumb is that monthly parking rates must be approximately \$120 to warrant construction of parking structures. We are rapidly reaching this as a standard downtown rate, and the city and province could facilitate the construction of parking structures with financial assistance and with streamlined approval procedures (the true public costs of not doing this are real, and warrant actual governmental expense to assist with such projects).

Because there are real citywide costs in leaving our downtown surface parking in its current state, the city could reasonably and aggressively raise property taxes on all surface parking lots, in recognition of the economic cost that is imposed on all of us by this land use. This would not be a punitive tax, but a tax that recognizes and reflects the true cost to our culture and economy.

And, finally, the city could do what Montreal did just last year. It can make surface parking in downtown illegal. Period. This extreme action is certainly fraught with problems, but the problems that come with inaction are greater.

There are real costs in leaving our downtown surface parking in its current state

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