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Localnews

Downtown Clawson feels growing pains

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Laura Marsoupian waits on tables at Black Lotus Brewing Company -- one of the success stories of downtown Clawson. The 143-seat business opened in September 2006 and is ready to expand.

David Dalton/Daily Tribune

CLAWSON -- Downtown leaders have put plans for a swanky landscaped parking lot with brick pavers and outdoor seating on hold for the northeast corner of 14 Mile Road and Main Street.

The proposed amenities would take up eight parking spaces in the most popular surface lot and Clawson officials said they can't afford to give up any ground for the project right now.

"To me, every space is premium," City Manager Richard Haberman said. "I don't want to scrap the parking lot plan, but we have a parking problem to address."

The downtown has about 330 off-street parking spaces concentrated at the four corners of 14 Mile and Main. The northeast surface lot is the largest with 84 spaces and it isn't meeting peak-time demand anymore.

The number of downtown visitors has grown as new businesses open their doors and even expand. Mike Allen, co-owner of the year-old, 143-seat Black Lotus Brewing Co., 1 E. 14 Mile, is ready to take over part of the tile business next door. He expects to add tables and install a full-service kitchen to boost his food sales beyond soups, salads, burgers and deli sandwiches.

"We need a plan that creates parking spaces and doesn't just beautify parking lots," said Allen, who also sits on the Downtown Development Authority.

The parking shortage is most evident from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., when up to 60 downtown employees use the northeast lot, according to Allen. To free up spaces for customers, Allen entered into a lease agreement with the nearby National City bank branch so his staff could park there.

"We're the only business on the corners to require employees to park off site," Allen lamented. "I'm not happy about that."

To solve the problem, city and DDA officials are looking at ways to reconfigure existing parking lots to squeeze out more spaces. They also updated the parking ordinance to allow for valet services. And, they are talking about buying and leasing more land around the downtown for parking.

Haberman said if the city and DDA borrowed \$1 million to acquire more land, each entity would owe about \$30,000 a year for

the next 20 years.

"This year is very likely to be a buyer's market for property," Haberman noted. "We're going to need short-term, intermediate and long-term solutions. We've got an energetic community. Clawson is running against the trend."

A natural food restaurant is lining up the financing to open at the Brown Bag It site and the DDA would like to attract more office users and downtown housing.

Clawson has a zoning ordinance that requires downtown building owners to use second-floor space for offices or apartments when a retailer moves into a ground-floor space. However, it is up for debate with some landlords arguing it restricts their options to fill vacancies.

"We need to reevaluate some things," Haberman said. "We are being cautious about change because we want any changes to add value."

The downtown also will get more decorative street lights and additional bicycle racks.

"You would be surprised at the number of people who walk here or ride their bike," Allen said of Black Lotus. "They come in and enjoy camaraderie with their neighbors. The people are interesting and they have pride in their community."

The DDA put Allen in charge of getting rid of the looming "cobra style" street lights and installing more of the decorative kind.

"Those old lights are ugly," he said. "We call it like it is in Clawson. We're not pretentious and that's another great thing about this city."

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