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Rift about Courtyard parking lot widens

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P.H. Craig, the owner of several parking spaces on West Franklin Street, took the first step Friday to stop Courtyard businesses' patrons and employees from using his spaces - at least for now.

Craig submitted a concept plan to Chapel Hill staff asking to modify or withdraw the 1979 permit issued to the Courtyard, which requires Craig to rent the spaces to the center.

He said he intends to divorce himself from the Courtyard.

"I will get away from them and ask for town center zoning," Craig said.

He said he has blocked off his 56 spaces after two years of neither payment nor communication from the Courtyard's owner, Spencer Young. Twenty-five parking spots remain accessible to Courtyard customers and employees, Craig said.

The lack of communication between the two men leaves the Courtyard businesses at an impasse, with little parking for customers.

Despite a full day of mediation Aug. 15, no progress has been made in the conflict between Craig and Young, who Craig said hasn't paid parking fees since his 2005 purchase of the Courtyard.

Young had not returned phone calls as of Tuesday night.

Owning the land since 1979, Craig said he simply wants "to get divorced, to get new zoning and to use it for parking."

Understanding the shortage of parking on West Franklin, Craig said he wants the spots he owns to be accessible. When asked if the Courtyard customers could use his lot in the future, he said, "possibly."

But Craig might not be the only entity losing money from the situation. Some of the Courtyard's businesses, such as 3Cups, a coffee and wine shop, are losing customers.

"It's killing our business," 3Cups owner Lex Alexander said. "There is no place for people to park."

Liz Parham, executive director of the Chapel Hill Downtown Partnership, said limiting parking means limiting customers.

"Right now there are more employees than parking spaces," she said.

"We did work with the town on temporary parking on Cameron Avenue, and it worked, but it was temporary."

Parham's group is working on a parking study now. She emphasized the importance of finding alternative solutions.

"We are trying to create an environment that supports community. Businesses do that," Parham said. She continued by saying that access only by foot or with limited parking "defeats the purpose by all means."

Businesses need a wide customer base, Alexander said.

"Young has a contract to provide us parking," he said.

Alexander said Young wants to buy the lot, but Craig replied, "No, no, no," to the question of selling the parking spaces to him.

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Alexander said Young has an obligation in the lease to provide spots.

"He will not lease the parking lot the way the previous owner did," Alexander said.

"We have received zero communications from (Young), and he doesn't seem to be concerned."

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