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Nonprofit enters parking fracas

Partnership may pay for mediator in downtown dispute
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Article Text:

CHAPEL HILL -- The business of the Chapel Hill Downtown Partnership is business.

And considering that parking drama is bad for business, the nonprofit may be getting involved in one of the town's long-running conflicts.

Members of the Downtown Partnership's executive committee discussed a plan Wednesday night to foot the bill for mediation between businessmen P.H. Craig and Spencer Young, combatants in a territorial argument centering on The Courtyard shopping center on West Franklin Street.

Young bought the Courtyard in 2005. Since then, he and Craig, owner of more than 50 parking spaces in an adjoining lot, have not been able to come to terms on a rental agreement.

The relationship between the two men has been stormy.

Recently Craig complained to town officials that Young was using his lot as a staging area for construction equipment. Last month, Craig barricaded entrances to his lot to keep Courtyard customers out.

Liz Parham, executive director of the Downtown Partnership, described a scenario in which Courtyard employees and those of nearby restaurants must search for parking, creating a crush for space that radiates for blocks.

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She voiced concern that if the parking situation is not resolved and employees continue to rack up citations, Courtyard businesses may decide to move.

Parham estimated that contracting a third-party mediator would cost about \$75 an hour. Executive committee member George Draper suggested capping any offer at 10 hours.

"We're at a standoff between two parties and no one is going to give either way," said executive committee member Andrea Rohrbacher. "I think it's a good gesture on our part. Even if they don't accept, it's a good gesture."

No definite timeframe was set for making an offer to Craig and Young, but Parham and the executive committee are empowered to explore the option.

In other Downtown Partnership business, Parham presented plans for a fall marketing strategy that targets students, their parents and football game day visitors.

Beginning this weekend, Downtown Partnership ambassadors will be circulating downtown and handing out fliers that promote Franklin and Rosemary streets as "an amazing mile" rich in food, music venues and locally owned shops.

The organization is encouraging stores to offer specials and discounts in conjunction with customers who display a UNC ID card, answer a Tar Heel-related trivia question or meet some other criteria.

Similar promotional programs dubbed "5th quarter" are planned for home football weekends.

The Downtown Partnership wants visitors to spend more time in the business district on game days, noting that the economic impact of the 2005 Boston College vs. UNC football game was estimated at \$6.7 million.

"Football makes a huge difference," Parham said. "With [new UNC coach] Butch Davis, I'm hearing from sports marketing that they're selling so many more seats."

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