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Project squeezes downtown parking

Parking alternatives made available, but be prepared to walk

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CHAPEL HILL - Eventually, the Downtown Partnership wants to make parking easier to find. But for now, it's about to get harder.

Ram Development Co. could break ground on the 140 West condominium project at Parking Lot No. 5 in January. That will erase about 170 parking spaces, including 103 hourly spots convenient to both ends of Franklin Street.

The town has come up with a plan to replace some of those parking spaces, but most of the substitute parking will lie on the far West End of Franklin Street, a good 10-minute walk from the town's crossroads at Columbia Street. And most of it is set back from Franklin Street at the end of a narrow alley.

"It's not the ideal situation," said Dwight Bassett, the town's economic development director. "In a perfect world, we would have liked to have gotten within a block and a half of Lot 5 if we could."

The town has struck a deal for 52 spaces off Basnight Lane. The landlord is P.H. Craig, who waged a well-publicized battle with Spencer Young over the parking lot at The Courtyard. Young's refusal to pay rent for Craig's adjacent parking and Craig's subsequently blocking off his spaces drove 3Cups coffee, tea and wine shop to relocate to South Elliott Road.

Bassett is negotiating with Joe Riddle to lease some of the spaces in the long-vacant lot that fronts Franklin Street to the east of The Courtyard. The town will also reassign 18 spaces for hourly use in Parking Lot No. 4 next to the Inter-Faith Council kitchen on West Rosemary Street and will create up to 15 new on-street spaces in front of University Square.

Bassett said he was particularly concerned with providing new parking near La Residence, Lime & Basil, Chapel Hill Florist and Aveda for employees and customers who would have used Lot 5.

"I have worked intentionally with placing parking where I've heard concerns," said Bassett. "We've worked hard to try and make sure that parking will be available to customers where it's needed."

These changes will offer some short-term help after Lot 5 closes, but Bassett is also looking forward to a January report from the Downtown Partnership suggesting some long-term parking improvements downtown. Among those suggestions will be some sort of "wayfinding" plan -- a proposal for signs to help visitors find parking and then attractions once they've parked.

"There's not a great directional wayfinding system in downtown," Bassett said. "If you come in on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard into downtown, I'm not sure it would have been easy to find Lot 5 if you didn't know it was there."

On Wednesday, Andy Solomon and Ping Song were able to find their way to Lot 5 by following a few "P" signs that do direct drivers to some of the parking downtown. The pair would have had a much harder time finding the West End parking for their trip to UNC's campus.

"It's further away, but we're from New York City, so we're used to walking," Solomon said. "We could walk for hours, as long as there's something interesting to see."

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