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Group fears Hintonburg relapse

Parking plan will 'keep people out' of area, thwart gentrification

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After years of social ills, Hintonburg is finally headed in the right direction, but residents say its progress is threatened by the city's new parking plan, which would see new meters along its commercial strip.

Unlike in Old Ottawa South and New Edinburgh, the two other areas where the city is planning to start charging for parking under its controversial new plan, the gentrification of Hintonburg is just under way.

The turnaround comes after a long struggle by residents against prostitution and drug-dealing and new businesses that have been slowly opening along Wellington Street between Holland Avenue and Somerset Street, although vacancies remain.

There is also new construction along the commercial strip with condos on top of ground-level businesses. Housing prices are up and the area is starting to become a hub for the arts.

"We've gone from talking about prostitutes and drug dealers to talking about new galleries opening up and how to try and keep some of the character of the neighbourhood while it undergoes this change," said Jeff Leiper, president of the Hintonburg Community Association. "But if the city keeps up with this plan, we might be talking about prostitutes and drug dealers again."

Mr. Leiper said in many ways, the city has embraced the idea of turning the area around. He said there are three planning studies trying to determine the best way to revitalize the area, but the work could be undone if the parking plan is implemented.

"Twenty years ago, when I first moved here, you didn't go to Hintonburg because there was nothing there, and it was rough," said Ken Duff, who lives in the West Wellington area next to Hintonburg. "The people in the area have done a lot of work getting the prostitutes and the bad element out, and if you introduce something that keeps people out of the area like this parking stuff, it could revert to the way it was."

Mr. Duff and several others from the area made their case to city council's transportation committee last week, but elected leaders on the committee, over the objections of downtown councillors, including Kitchissippi Councillor Christine Leadman, whose ward includes Hintonburg, opted for the new meters in the area.

Ms. Leadman said credit for turning Hintonburg around lies with the citizens of the area, and hitting them with this, just when they are starting to see signs of success is unfair and shortsighted. She said as the area gets fewer and fewer city resources such as police, bylaw, and building inspectors among others.

"These people have worked very, very hard, and this threatens the small gains that

have been made," she said. "Things are changing, and it's to the credit of residents in the area, but there are still lots of issues, and this threatens to put things in reverse."

The decision to install meters in a number of older neighbourhoods, along with hiking parking rates by 75 cents an hour to \$3.25 and charging for parking on Saturdays, is to be debated by city council Wednesday.

The decision of the committee came after city council hastily approved a new parking system during its budget deliberations in December when it was looking for ways to keep the 2008 property-tax increase as low as possible.

Mr. Leiper said his association is working hard to "put feet on the street" in the area because busy areas are safe areas, and that any move, including charging \$3.25 per hour for parking when it used to be free, could keep people from visiting the area.

He said if there are no people on Wellington Street for good reasons, it won't be long until there are people on it again for bad reasons.

Both Mr. Leiper and Mr. Duff said they are not opposed to putting meters in the area at some point in the future, just not now. Mr. Leiper said if things continue as they are, he thinks within five years, meters could be added without creating a huge problem.

Just give the area a few years, Mr. Duff agreed.

"There will be a point when this area can contribute to the revenue of the city, but to do this now threatens the gains the community has made, and its future ability to contribute that revenue for that matter," he said.

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