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Flawed study, inconclusive numbers, and “a significant error” used to justify metered Parking in Hintonburg

WELLINGTON STREET WEST – Hintonburg residents and business leaders are baffled by a stream of new information coming out of City Hall showing poor communication between senior city staff, faulty study data, and a parking department driven by revenue demands rather than traffic management or business development needs. And to top it all off, the study being used to justify the decision was completed during the week before Christmas 2006 – hardly an average week in any retail district.

“This is a flawed and misguided policy driven by distorted information and short-term thinking.” says Mike Steinberg, interim Chair of the newly formed Wellington West Business Improvement Area (BIA). “It is inappropriate and harmful for City Council to impose this on Hintonburg – one of Ottawa’s most distressed neighbourhoods. It’s a classic lose-lose situation.”

Rachel Russo, owner of Levonian the Shirtmaker on Wellington Street West and long-time Hintonburg business activist says: “My business has been in the middle of the area they’re looking at for 17 years. “And I don’t need a study to tell you: the parking pressure just isn’t there. Yes, the area is getting better thanks to the hard work of the businesses and community. But give us a break: we’re not there yet!”

After fighting the parking issue since November, area businesses were angered and shocked last week by the decision of several members of Council’s Transportation Committee and mayor Larry O’Brien to go ahead with metered parking in Hintonburg. The decision would see “pay-and-display” meters installed along the entire Hintonburg portion of Wellington Street West as early as March 2008.

The decision seemed to ignore the years of work on several other city-led initiatives:

- March 2008 is just one month before a major two-year city road reconstruction project begins to tear up Wellington Street.
- The long-term Hintonburg Neighbourhood Planning Initiative (NPI), a city-led pilot project in community planning, came out strongly against meters, and is still preparing its final report.
- Council has just approved the formation of the Wellington West Business Improvement Area, organized to address long-term issues like vacancy rates and parking problems in Hintonburg.

But short hours after the decision by Transportation Committee – which ignored petitions from almost 50 delegations from across the city – Hintonburg residents and businesses got several new reasons to be upset during a meeting with city manager Kent Kirkpatrick and Director of Parking operations Michael Flainek, followed by the release of the 2006 parking study that was used to justify the extension of paid parking to Hintonburg.

During the meeting:

- Kirkpatrick apologized for allowing Hintonburg to be included in the November staff proposal over the wishes of the NPI which he supports. “We made a significant error in policy formation at the senior management level... The ball got dropped in the consideration of areas.”
- Both men admitted that the proposal was driven primarily by revenue considerations and that the decision to include Hintonburg happened in the pressure of the pre-budget rush.

- Flainek confirmed that revenue calculations were based on broad assumptions using data from “other downtown areas” like Elgin Street and Bank Street, rather than the business character of Hintonburg or ability of shoppers to pay the same rates as the Byward Market or Glebe.
- Flainek claimed in the meeting that a 2006 study proved that there was “consistently more than 80% volume” – and insisted when challenged by an incredulous community member that the study only dealt with Hintonburg and not Wellington Village.

But when BIA members saw the study later in the week, a number of problems quickly became evident:

- The study covered the entirety of Wellington Street West, including the more busy and affluent Wellington Village West of Holland – an area that does experience higher parking volumes as the study shows, but is not part of the area to be metered.
- The study was done on only two days – Wednesday, December 16, 2006, and Saturday, December 20, 2006. In other words, during the last shopping week before Christmas, a time which is both more busy, and totally unrepresentative of parking patterns over the rest of the year.
- Despite questionable timing, the study shows very low parking volumes in Hintonburg during most times of the day, except between Parkdale and Holland – which will be under major road reconstruction for 8 of the remaining 10 months in 2008 – and near heavily used social services like Hintonburg Community Centre, OCISO, and the Rosemount Library.

In short: it became evident that staff revenue projections are clearly going to be wrong, the volume claimed by city staff simply doesn't exist in Hintonburg, and Council will be jeopardizing many years of painstaking work by other city departments, community activists and businesses.

“All of this is looking like a colossal screw-up.” says Chris Green, interim Vice Chair of the BIA, and a member of the NPI, who attended the meeting with Kirkpatrick and Flainek. “The study is flawed and the city's revenue projections don't consider the huge impact of construction on an area that still needs a lot of revitalization. City Council is trying to get blood from a stone in Hintonburg.”

Christine Leadman, who is the area Councillor, a member of the BIA Interim Board, and a dissenting voice on the Transportation Committee, agrees: "This plan needs to go back to the drawing board. All the stakeholders, communities, and organizations need to agree to a new approach that will make sense and provide real "regulation and control" for on-street parking inventory to the benefit of the citizens and businesses of Ottawa."

And the city's need for revenue? Business leaders point out that the costs of all the factors above are simply not appearing on the balance sheet. As Leadman says: "It is much more difficult and costly to reverse a bad decision than it is to just do it right the first time."

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