

City releases parking study recommendations; new parking zones to take effect October 1, 2019

The City of New Bedford released its downtown and waterfront parking study recommendations, based on a study by the consulting firm Stantec that began last year.

With significant input from stakeholders, including residents and small business owners in the downtown and waterfront area, and collection of data on parking use in the area, the recommendations were developed to document existing demand and improve parking for residents and visitors.

Other goals were to ensure that the recommendations are customer-friendly for parking enforcement, signage and wayfinding for visitors, walking/biking/transit improvements, financial sustainability for the City's parking, and other systemic improvements.

It had been several decades since the City last undertook a comprehensive look at parking in the downtown and on the waterfront, and with many significant changes and developments in both areas, as well as advancements in parking management practices and technology, the City determined a study was long overdue. The study was funded through a combination of the Downtown Parking Enterprise Fund, New Bedford Port Authority, and MassDevelopment funding.

While several major recommendations have been proposed by the Stantec study, the City will adopt one of the recommendations effective October 1, 2019. On that date, time limits in metered spaces throughout downtown New Bedford will be extended from the current 2-hour time limit using three zones.

The highest-demand area, or the core, of downtown will be extended to a 3-hour limit. Moving farther from the center of downtown, a second zone will be extended to a 4-hour limit. The farthest zone from the downtown with metered spaces will be an unlimited time limit. Parking rates will not change in the three zones; they will remain 75 cents per hour, with longer parking limits.

Area Studied

The study area included the entirety of downtown New Bedford and selected waterfront areas. The downtown study area was bounded by: Kempton Street on the north side; Walnut Street on its south side; County Street on its west side; and JFK Boulevard (Route 18) on its east side. It also included the area of the New Bedford Public Schools Administration Building west of County Street, and waterfront parking east of Route 18.

Key Findings of the Parking Study

The parking study included several key findings from the team at Stantec based on qualitative and quantitative data, including meetings with downtown stakeholders and collection of parking data. Key findings included: high rate of driving into downtown New Bedford; public perception of parking varies widely; employee use of more convenient spaces compared to visitor use of more convenient spaces; underutilization of parking garages in the evenings; highly enforced parking, and more.

Recommendations

The study by Stantec made the following recommendations related to parking availability:

- Extending time limits across the downtown in several zones. The study recommends extending the time limits to be longer than the current 2-hour parking limit, and creating three zones. The three zones would include a 3-hour limit, a 4-hour limit, and an unlimited-time parking. The zones are in the map

attached and are based on demand of spaces. The study recommends that the restructured pricing change in the three zones.

- Incentivize use of parking garages. The study recommends increasing the use of parking garages, especially after work hours, given the ample supply of parking spaces. The study recommends reducing or eliminating the cost of garage parking after 6:00 p.m., and working with local businesses and restaurants to promote free or discounted parking in garages. Earlier this summer, the City completed the major, two-year renovation project on the Elm Street Garage, which included significant improvements to its security, lighting, structural performance, and cosmetic changes to the lobby, stairs and elevator areas.

The study also made the following recommendations:

- Encourage public use of ample private supply. The study recommends the City work with private property owners to open parking to the public, through permit programs, paid parking, or other parking arrangements.
- Prioritize high-volume/business-friendly curb. The study recommends managing curbside pickup and dropoff locations that would improve locations for centrally located places to pick up and drop off.
- Enhance user experience. The study recommends a customer-first approach to provide more resources and information, along with a street presence, to make both visitors and residents feel more welcome as part of the Traffic Commission's management goals.
- Communications coordinated with downtown businesses. The study recommends partnering with downtown businesses in a coordinated, systematic effort to help spread the word around parking in downtown New Bedford.

- Enhance signage, wayfinding, lighting, and safety. The study recommends improving signage that directs visitors (known as wayfinding), and improving lighting and safety with suggestions such as brighter LED lights.
- Multi-modal network improvements. The study recommends reviewing one-way streets in the downtown to improve safety, improving pedestrian and bicycling access, and incentivizing shared commuting or other forms of transit.
- Improve waterfront parking strategies. The study recommends parking strategies on the waterfront, setting up a waterfront parking coordination committee to determine potential changes to parking on the waterfront, coordinate with waterfront stakeholders, and simplify the management of parking on the waterfront, which currently consists of 20 separate regulations.

City will adopt time limit changes and new parking zones on October 1, 2019.

While the City is taking all recommendations under consideration, one recommendation will be adopted effective October 1, 2019.

The City will extend time limits on metered parking spaces in the downtown, extended in different zones to 3-hour, 4-hour, and a section with no time limits. The City will not adopt changes to the pricing in these zones on October 1; metered parking will remain at 75 cents per hour.

The green zone, at the core or center of downtown, will be extended from its current 2-hour limit to a 3-hour limit.

The blue zone, the next zone outside the center of the downtown, will be extended from its current 2-hour limit to a 4-hour limit.

The yellow zone, the farthest zone outside the center of the

downtown, will be extended from its current 2-hour limit to unlimited parking.

“The City has heard from residents and local businesses about the need to modernize parking operations downtown. We’ve continued to invest in improving parking, including the City’s recent major renovation of the Elm Street Garage and enhanced technology that makes parking easier through an app and credit card payments. This comprehensive review of downtown parking needs furthers our focus on improving parking for everyone,” said Mayor Jon Mitchell. “I’m especially grateful to the many downtown stakeholders who worked hard to offer and consider locally-driven recommendations for parking downtown.”

“As downtown New Bedford continues to grow and attract more visitors, the time is right to consider how to best accommodate business, restaurant and arts patrons’ parking needs,” said Rick Kidder, President & CEO of the South Coast Chamber. “The parking study was completed in a collaborative way, partnering with downtown business stakeholders, and presents many potential ideas for improving parking for residents, businesses, and visitors in New Bedford. When we have to talk about parking solutions, it is a wonderful sign that the downtown is becoming increasingly economically vibrant. Business is good and the need for parking reflects that.”

Arthur Bennett, a long-time downtown resident and DNB Board leader said, “I commend the City for taking on this often difficult and contentious aspect of downtown life, and recognizing that improving and modernizing our parking system could provide a significant boost to downtown development. The report’s recommendations reflect an understanding of downtown New Bedford’s unique features, and they are in line with best practices throughout the country. I believe they will make our parking system more efficient and user-friendly over time. I’m particularly excited for the flexibility of the new zone system, and the City’s commitment to making the parking

management apparatus more customer-service oriented.”