

Is it time to turn Custom House Square back into a parking lot?

In February of 2013, the City of New Bedford announced that the **Custom House Parking lot at the heart of downtown New Bedford would be turned into a park**. Mayor Jon Mitchell was at the start of his second year in office and he wanted to add green space in downtown. New Bedford would lose its only long-term parking spot outside of the parking garage. With all the new businesses that have popped up in downtown New Bedford since, is it time for Mayor Mitchell to reverse course and give back the 60 parking spots? Let me present my case for this happening.

As you can see from this overview image, the downtown area lost about 60 parking spots when Custom House was converted to a park.



About 10 months later, the City announced the **lower Union Street improvement to add patio areas** for the businesses, but yet another 16 parking spots in the downtown business district would be removed. Within one year, the downtown area would lose about 80 parking spots. This was all before the restaurant/bar boom that would happen over the next 4 years.

Let's forget about all the existing restaurants that were already downtown in 2013 like Freestone's, No Problemo, Bar 908, The Grden, The Pour FarmTavern, Cork and Rose Alley. Since 2013 there has been a boom of new restaurants/bars that were not downtown when these improvements were finalized.

On Purchase Street you now have Greasy Luck, a major nightlife venue that can hold hundreds of people. It was a rarely used Whaling Museum research library before that. On lower Union Street you now have the Moby Dick Brewery that serves large crowds too. Before that it was a rarely used campaign

headquarters for politicians and hopeful casino operators. These two locations alone now bring hundreds of people downtown daily.

On North Water Street you now have Tia Maria's and Whaler's Tavern. These spots were low trafficked businesses before, but now see heavy traffic daily. You also now have the recently expanded DNB Burgers that was a clothing store and The Baker near the downtown Police Station opposite of not so old Portobello. Cultivator Shoals now serves drinks near the New Bedford Tattoo Company on Union Street. Carmine's moved into the old Candleworks building, but at least they have their own parking.

What's coming downtown? The empty National Club was recently purchased and will become a restaurant this year. It's a place with no natural parking. A noodle shop may end up in the original Destination Soups spot opposite of the old Slices location. A new artist co-working space is opening on that block soon and what happens when someone moves into the empty Pier 37 (formerly Fins)? Or if Club 908 opens back up as a sports bar?

Yes, there is plenty of parking in the Elm Street and Zeiterion parking garages, but many people don't feel safe late at night or early mornings. The City is spending **\$5 million to upgrade the Elm Street parking garage**, but it will take a lot to convince people it is a safe place to travel at night. Women simply don't feel comfortable having a few drinks and walking to their car in parking garages at 2am.

To the mayor's credit, he has led a major economic boom in downtown New Bedford, but now it is time to either consider converting Custom House Square back to a 60-space parking lot, or lead a major push to make the two, less-convenient downtown parking garages safe. Making them safe won't be enough, you'll have to convince the residents that they are safe and worth the extra walk.

