Downtown commuters, you have some hard choices ahead

By: Anne Wallace Allen November 28, 2016 0

Thursday, Nov. 17 started out benignly enough in Boise, with the usual mini-rush hour downtown under grey November skies. But by the time I reached the intersection of Front and Ninth streets at 7:30 that morning, it was clear a minor parking apocalypse of sorts was underway.

Usually I just zoom straight into the City Center garage and find a spot on the fourth floor, the domain of parkers with a monthly permit. But on this day, the line to get in was uncharacteristically long, snaking out of the garage and turning a corner on Front Street, blocking traffic.

Once inside, I eventually found a spot on the seventh floor. But my co-worker couldn't find a space at all, and ended up leaving to work at home.

And so it begins: With Boise's big-city growth has come the kind of big-city parking problems we have all been warned about.

In general, it's still easy enough to find a space in Capital City Development Corp.'s downtown garages. The crunch on Nov. 17 happened because United Dairymen of Idaho was having its annual convention that day at the Boise Centre, with about 500 people in attendance. Meanwhile, there was an event at JUMP, just down the street. The combination proved a little too much for the City Centre garage.

But realistically, it isn't any one convention that has created a tipping point for downtown Boise parking. Max Clark, CCDC's parking director, said the proximate cause for the overall increase lately is the occupancy of the nine-story City Center complex, which opened Oct. 20, and the closure Oct. 1 of Parcel B, a large dirt lot that has long served as a safety valve for overflow parking.

A few different groups have been preparing for this day. First, CCDC raised parking rates to $120 and $135 a month at its garages last winter. But that didn't prompt many commuters to look for alternatives, said Clark. He estimated he only lost about 10 customers when the rates went up. Meanwhile, he has 300 people on a waiting list for CCDC's 1,965 monthly spaces.

However, Clark has plenty of other plans to nudge commuters away from their single-passenger vehicles. One is a carpool preference program that he plans to roll out early next year. If you sign up for a carpool through ACHD's Commuteride, you'll get a chance to jump the waiting list queue for a spot in one of the garages.

Clark also plans to bring back car share vehicles through a program like Enterprise or Zipcar and park them in the garage for carpoolers to use if they have an unanticipated need for a car in the middle of the workday. He's a big advocate of changing the single-passenger-car mindset.

"I will consider our mission successful if we change the dialogue from, 'Where do I park?' to, 'What are my options to get downtown and around town?'" said Clark. "We need to provide some viable alternatives for people."

The big kahuna of parking-relief ideas is the park-and-ride, a notion that private business owners, CCDC, ACHD, the city, and others have been tossing around for a few years now. This time, Kelly Badesheim (known to many as the recently married former Kelli Fairless, of Valley Regional Transit) is leading a
study group that is closely assessing whether commuters would be willing to pay about $40 to park their cars in a lot outside of the city center and use a van service to travel the rest of the way.

Clark said one possible site for a park-and-ride lot is the College of Western Idaho property on the west side of town, on the Boise River. It’s already paved, though Clark said CCDC would spend money improving and beautifying the lots it chooses. Implementing the program, buying 18-passenger vans with Wi-Fi, and hiring drivers would cost around $1.6 million, he estimates. Another possible site is an existing but underused park-and-ride lot on Elder street, in south Boise near the Boise Airport. Some people leave their cars there now, and ride the city bus in.

Clark, Badesheim and others are studying the park-and-ride concept with a design thinking process, to make sure their ideas evolve as they get input from stakeholders.

“We want to be sure to bring a solution that will be desirable, feasible, and viable,” Badesheim said. “We’re not designing it based on what we think the customer would want, but based on what the customer does want.” She’s taking park-and-ride suggestions at info@rideline.org.

If the group comes up with a viable park-and-ride plan, Clark said it will probably start operating next summer. He added that it’s more likely to be successful if parking costs continue to rise downtown, something he’d like to see happen.

“I have heard of $10 for surface lots, and $20 for garage parking in some places, per month,” Clark said. “I don’t like punishing people and I don’t want it to sound like that. But I don’t think sometimes the prices are reflective of the value of the asset.”

As for the parking apocalypse, there are surely others on the horizon. While December is not typically a big month for conventions, when asked, Mary-Michael Rodgers, the communications manager for the Boise Centre, said there’s a breakfast for 1,200 people on Dec. 21st. That’s sure to cause a logjam in some garages.

Meanwhile, some local business owners are thinking of joining forces to create their own shuttle system, at least until the park-and-ride is up and running. One is Grove Hotel General Manager John Cunningham, who has about 450 workers traveling to the hotel every day. Like Clark, he would like to see movement away from the idea of commuting in a single-passenger vehicle.

“It’s a nice problem to have; we’re all busy,” Cunningham said. “It’s going to be great in the long term. You make it a little more uncomfortable for people in their wallet, in terms of convenience, and you’re going to see a lot more demand for public transportation.”

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