

The Backyard Tourist Pays to Park

Written by Mark Shaffer

Tuesday, 04 January 2011 13:22



Something's got to give in downtown Beaufort (while there still *is* a downtown Beaufort).

A true story

Downtown Beaufort on a mid-summer's day. I'm sitting at the wine bar in Kathleen's chatting with the restaurant's eponymous owner, Kathy Bussing. A well-dressed older gentleman walks in and asks if he might have change for the parking meter. Kathy's only happy to oblige, in fact she's been at war with the recently outsourced downtown parking enforcement by Park Beaufort, local arm of Atlanta based Lanier Parking Solutions. Kathy and some of her staff have lately taken to walking up and down Bay Street armed with rolls of coins, feeding expired meters just ahead of the duly designated "Parking Ambassadors." She feels the aggressive ticketing and steeper fines are bad for business. "It sure doesn't say *y'all come back!*"

The gentleman walks out with his change and a promise that he and his wife will be in for lunch.

Bussing also says the two-hour time limit on Bay Street is part of the problem. "Customers complain all the time," she says. Two hours just isn't enough time for visitors to be able to enjoy the downtown experience – to shop, sightsee and dine – without fear of being ticketed or interrupting their lunch to move the car. As if on cue, our gentleman returns, but without his wife. In the few minutes it takes him to walk half a block, ask for change and return, a Lanier staffer tickets his vehicle even as his wife explains that he's gone for change to feed the meter. What he says resonates even more ominously six months later.

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“You’ve got a nice little town here,” he says. “We’ve been here before. We were looking forward to having some lunch and wandering around, do a little shopping. But I think we’ll spend our money somewhere a little friendlier.” I copy this down in my notebook as it comes out of his mouth. He’s not fuming. He’s not ready to punch anyone. He’s simply *aggravated*, a bit offended and perhaps a little hungry.

“Tell your tourism people, your mayor – whoever – that we won’t be back. And I’m betting we’re not alone.”

As he walks out Kathy simply says, “And *that’s* what I’m talking about.”

A few months later, Kathleen’s is out of business. Half a block away the venerable downtown bookseller, Bay Street Trading Company, is empty. And as we go to deadline, word comes that our neighbor Lipsitz Shoes will close at the end of February, ending a remarkable 109-year retail run on Bay St. for the Lipsitz family. New retail space built as the economy went bust remains vacant as do older structures like the Lipsitz Department Store and the old Breakwater location. Is the current parking plan to blame? Not entirely, but it certainly isn’t helping to make things any better in a tough economy.

The Brouhaha

Parking in downtown Beaufort has been a topic of controversy, concern, division and frustration for a very long time – decades in fact. The latest brouhaha comes out of the city’s controversial decision last year to privatize parking revenue collection and enforcement, replace meters with electronic kiosks and sharply hike fees and fines. Opinions on the matter differed widely and wildly. Accusations flew and rumors of hidden agendas, collusion and conspiracy hung on the spring breeze like buzzards circling a kill. Conversations not dominated by the nasty state of the national economy soon turned to the nasty state of the local economy and the effect this plan would have on it. The lines of demarcation were well drawn with most bars and restaurants lining up against it, and – with a few exceptions – just about everyone else giving it an enthusiastic thumbs up.

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At the center of this latest perceived “problem” were the precious spaces along the core shopping district along Bay Street. For years shopkeepers had complained that cheap parking, minimal enforcement and low fines encouraged restaurant and bar employees to “poach” these prime spots, thereby reducing turnover and costing retailers customers and revenue. Prior “experiments” with free parking in the area were said to be failures for that very reason. The fact that large numbers of these employees walk to their cars late at night with pockets full of cash and have been the targets of robbery and rape remains largely and inexplicably unaddressed. (More on that in future issues.)

In the more than six months since the complete plan was implemented, opinions have shifted and the only business that seems to be thriving in downtown Beaufort is the very busy Lanier/Park Beaufort operation on Scott Street. Bright orange violation envelopes routinely decorate dozens of windshields at once in an unprecedented display. One businessman calls them “Dayglo get-out-of-town tickets.” Tourists and locals alike gather in frustrated pods around the kiosks, trying to shield the hard to read screens from the sun, pushing rejected bills back into the slot only to have them spit back once more. I watch as many simply give up and get back in their cars or throw their hands up in frustration. Conversation in downtown businesses, bars and restaurants ultimately turns to what has come to be known as “The Parking Issue.” And I’m here to tell you the mood is ugly.

In fact the mood is so ugly that the unthinkable has happened: a consensus opinion appears to have forged a sense of solidarity among a huge majority of the downtown business community. In December a coalition of nearly 90 business owners (including *Lowcountry Weekly* publisher Jeff Evans) signed and presented a petition to city council proposing that the free holiday parking be extended another six months and time limits raised to three hours. Tony Royal, who’s owned Bay Street Outfitters for fifteen years, says it’s time for the city to take a step back and re-evaluate the situation. Like most of his colleagues, he believes Lanier’s aggressive ticketing coupled with steeper fines and confusion at the kiosks is killing business. “Turnover is good,” he says, “but it’s got to be gentle. We’ve got to take the time to come up with a better solution.”

Across the street, Deanna Bowdish, owner of The Gallery, echoes the thought. “We shot ourselves in the foot with this new system. The community is refusing to use it. People go elsewhere, not downtown. It’s a disaster and a mess.”

Both Bowdish and Royal depend on long time regular customers. Both say those regulars now avoid dealing with the hassle of downtown and, as Royal points out, this leads to other things. “I think the biggest problem that’s come out of this is that we’re getting a reputation as an

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unfriendly place to visit," he says. "And we can't have that, not in Beaufort."

"We're all very aware of what concerns our downtown," says Beaufort City Councilman Mike McFee, but he also says the current situation is another frustration to council. "Many of those same people were in favor of going forward with this plan. My counter [to the petition] would be that those people should have been more involved before the issue reached this point for them." He says council will continue to study it. As for free parking downtown, don't get your hopes up.

The Bottom Line

There's a quote on the Lanier Parking Solutions website (www.lanierparking.com) that reads "Parking is the glue that holds a downtown together." Apparently, this does not apply so much in Beaufort. I believe my friend and colleague Richard Brooks boiled the entire messy situation down to the bone when he observed, "The whole thing is aggravating and people will naturally avoid aggravation."

People are indeed aggravated. I see it downtown everyday, I'm told about it constantly, and, yes, I have experienced it myself. I also know that besides the hits on business and reputation this situation has sucked a lot of the fun out of this town, and that is a shame. Right now this isn't about who is to blame or why, it's about owning up to the cold hard fact that a mistake has been made and must be corrected before it's too late.

In the end, all that hangs in the balance is the future of a viable downtown, the long and short term economic impact of its success or failure and that of every single individual associated with it. Clearly, if we insist on pursuing this folly at such a cost the final result will be a disaster that could take years if not decades from which to recover – if at all. In the meantime the snowball's rolling downhill and there's a long, hard winter ahead.

To be continued...

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In upcoming issues and online we will continue to follow and examine this issue as it evolves in 2011. We'll talk to the players most involved in it. We'll also try and make sense of a concern that has to do with much more than just parking. And we'd like to know what you think. Go online at www.lcweekly.com to take our parking survey and give us your feedback on Facebook.

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