

DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Light Rail Parking

The Department of Planning and Development (DPD) is proposing legislation to help encourage additional people to ride light rail and provide for some economic return on lots near light rail stations.

- The legislation would allow light rail parking as an interim use on existing lots that already have legally established parking in four of the five station areas in Southeast Seattle (Mt. Baker, Columbia City, Othello and Rainier Beach Station Areas) where principal use (commuter) parking is not currently allowed.
- Light rail parking would not be allowed within the North Beacon Hill station area.
- Owners would be able to make parking available to rail commuters, employees and patrons of nearby businesses.
- Light rail commuter and business support parking would further be allowed on lots outside the station areas that have existing parking and lots that are accessory to institutions within walking distance of the light rail stations, including lots near the North Beacon Hill light rail station meeting this criterion.
- The proposal would not allow principal structures to be demolished in order to establish a parking use.
- The proposal would limit the number of non-accessory parking spaces that may be established on a lot to 40.
- The interim use parking allowance would be permitted for a maximum term of three years, and the ability to apply for a permit would expire at the end of 2012.

This example illustrates how the proposal might be applied:

Within the Station Area Overlay District (SAOD), a merchant has an existing customer parking lot but there is more parking than is needed to accommodate customers of the business, or the business has closed. A qualifying site could be used as an interim parking lot for commuters to facilitate light rail ridership, particularly to encourage residents of Southeast Seattle who do not live within walking distance of the light rail stations to try the system as an alternative to driving downtown.

Introduction

The economic recession has introduced uncertainty into the development process even in areas near light rail. Limited prospects for new development exist in the near-term. Many development proposals are now awaiting the return of the capital markets and local demand. Vacant and underused lots and those awaiting development in and around light rail stations in Southeast Seattle may pose a safety hazard as well as create an unsightly condition. Vacant or underused property can be particularly troublesome in and around these business districts.

Providing temporary additional parking in or near the station areas in Southeast Seattle can facilitate light rail ridership. Additional parking can be provided on certain sites where parking lots now exist but are underutilized by the businesses, institutions, or other uses that they serve, or the businesses have closed. This is also true of the sites of several institutions outside of SAOD boundaries but within a quarter mile of a light rail station.

The Mayor directed DPD to prepare legislation to help address issues of safety, improve the appearance of neighborhoods, and help provide more riders for light rail, while allowing an economic return for property owners. DPD has conferred with both the City Council and the Seattle Planning Commission in developing the proposed legislation.

Proposal

The proposal would make the following changes to the Land Use Code:

- Establish a new “interim” use, within Code Section 23.42.040, Intermittent and Temporary Uses;
- Allow principal use parking lots as an interim use for up to 40 spaces (parking available to the public, including light rail commuters) on eligible lots in all zones within the Station Area Overlay District, including commercial and multifamily zones, except within the boundaries of the North Beacon Hill station area, to facilitate ridership of light rail;
- Allow the proposed interim principal use parking lots for up to 40 spaces on eligible lots in any zone that are occupied or owned by established institutions and are within a quarter mile of a light rail station, including institutions within a quarter of a mile of the North Beacon Hill station area;
- Limit interim use parking to existing legally established surface parking lots, and no principal structures may be demolished for the sole purpose of permitting interim use parking;
- Limit interim use parking to property that is located outside of most types of Environmentally Critical Areas;
- Limit the term of interim use permits to a maximum of three years. This permit would not be renewable. The ability to apply for interim use permits would expire at the end of 2012.
- At a minimum, permit applicants would be required to make the following improvements: 1) surface parking lots would require at least a crushed rock surface or paving as needed to accommodate barrier free parking; 2) exterior lighting must be provided; 3) lighting, including vehicle lights, must be shielded or screened; 4) landscaping must be provided per the standards of the zone and may be in planter boxes or similar containers.
- Establish interim use as non-appealable Type I Master Use Permit. If threshold requirements for environmental review under the State Environmental Policy Act are triggered, then the review would be an appealable Type II review with public notice and opportunity to comment and appeal. The threshold for commercial uses is based on square footage; for parking, more than 40 parking spaces triggers SEPA.

Analysis

Under the current Land Use Code, the establishment or change of use of any buildings or properties requires approval according to the procedures set forth in Chapter 23.76, Procedures for Master Use Permits and Council Land Use Decisions. Principal use parking (parking that is available to the public for a fee), in particular, is permitted only in certain zones and may be subject to special permitting requirements, such as conditional use review, or may be prohibited. Parking in general is also subject to various development standards, including space dimensions, curb cut requirements, lighting, screening, and landscaping requirements.

The proposal would make long-term parking (commuter and other types of parking, over four hours) easier to permit on an interim basis within four of the five station areas of the SAOD in Southeast Seattle, as well as on lots occupied by or owned by institutions outside of the SAOD, but within one quarter mile of all five of the light rail stations. The North Beacon Hill station area would not be included in the proposal, due to concentration of parking lots at key sites or intersections, possible traffic impacts including weekend traffic due to relative proximity to Downtown and to the sports stadiums, and the more fully developed residential character within the neighborhood. However, institutions within a quarter mile of the Beacon Hill light rail station would be included, as the institution sites tend to be outside the area of most interest for near-term transit oriented development and thus can be used for interim parking even if the nearby station area is excluded.

Interim use light rail commuter and business support parking are intended to provide an option for short-term activity at a site, which helps support an area and minimize the potential blighting effect of an underused, fenced-off vacant lot pending economic recovery. This also provides some economic return to the property owner, while waiting for the economy to improve.

The improvements needed for the proposed interim parking are intended to be the minimum necessary, so the relative costs are better balanced against the return on the investment. This is an important consideration due to the short-term nature of the use. Such interim uses would cease when the term of the permit expires.

For lots within the SAOD, and a few institutional sites within a quarter of a mile of the light rail stations, existing parking lots may have space available for commuter parking. Impacts from principal use parking on these sites would be controlled by limiting the eligible sites to those with existing parking uses, and limiting the number of principal use parking spaces to no more than 40 spaces per site. Accessory parking is not required by the existing Land Use Code for businesses and most residential uses within the overlay districts, and these could serve as commuter lots while users of the Sound Transit Link light rail are adjusting to use of the new system. As lots are developed the total number of interim parking lots is expected to decrease and, of course, all proposed interim parking would have limited duration.

There are a total of approximately 27 sites total in the four eligible station area overlays and nine institutional sites within a quarter mile of a light rail station that have existing parking and could convert existing accessory parking to new interim use parking under the proposal.

- Mt. Baker station area – ten sites within the SAOD and two institution sites outside (within a quarter mile of the light rail station). Total approximate parking (existing lots that could be converted) – 1,266 spaces.
- Beacon Hill station area – seven sites within are all excluded by the proposal but four sites within a quarter mile – 175 spaces outside, mostly on the El Centro de la Raza site.
- Columbia City station area – two sites within and three sites within a quarter mile – 105 spaces including about 25 outside the SAOD on two church lots and an elder care facility.
- Othello station area – 11 sites within and no sites outside, although there are several sites in commercial zones outside the SAOD where parking could be permitted outright by current Code – 1,175 spaces.
- Henderson station area – four sites within and no sites outside – 250 existing parking spaces.

Due to the proposed limit of 40 parking spaces per interim use lot (estimated to be approximately 36 lots), a maximum of about 1,215 parking spaces out of an overall total of about 2,971 spaces could be converted to interim principal use parking from existing accessory parking. It cannot be determined how many of these potential spaces will actually be established and used as interim parking. Likely, not all property owners would be interested in providing this type of parking. It is expected, however, that the total number of potential interim parking spaces would not significantly impact traffic or add to traffic in or near the Station Area Overlay Districts.

Recommendation

While the desired use of property near the light rail stations is mixed-use development within a highly pedestrian environment, the economic downturn has and will continue to delay such development. Therefore, the light rail parking proposal is a response to the unique and serious downturn now affecting the regional economy, as well as a desire to help bring people to the area, support new light rail ridership, and to promote some economic vitality in the area. DPD recommends approval of the proposed amendments.

**Light Rail Parking
 Summary Table**

Proposal	Provisions	Situations aided
<p>Intent: promote rail ridership, encourage use of vacant properties and provide economic return until the development market returns.</p> <p>Would apply to SE Seattle areas with rail service: Mt. Baker, Columbia City, Othello & Rainier Beach Stations.</p> <p>Proposal would allow:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of existing surface parking areas in a Station Area Overlay District (SAOD) as commuter and customer parking; and • Use of extra parking as commuter and customer parking on land related to existing institutions within ¼ mile of a light rail station, including the Beacon Hill station. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commuter or customer parking would be permitted as an interim use for a maximum period of 3 years. Ability to apply would end on 12-31-2012. • Standards include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Limited to 40 spaces per lot; ○ No principal structures may be demolished; ○ Parking surface may be gravel; ○ Landscaping may be in removable planters; ○ Shielded lighting required; ○ Drainage, grading and other environmental codes would apply. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An existing stand alone parking lot that is underused in a SAOD. • An existing legally established business with a parking area that isn't needed for the business in a SAOD. • An existing lot with unused parking associated with an institution use, such as a church, in any zone, within ¼ mile of a light rail station.