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St. Paul loan program to help Central Corridor LRT parking problems isn't enough

By Brian Johnson, Staff Writer
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Some University Avenue business owners say a new \$1 million program to help alleviate Central Corridor-construction-related parking problems still leaves them in a tight spot.

Last week, St. Paul officials approved the Neighborhood Commercial Parking Pilot Program, which will offer \$500,000 worth of forgivable loans to help University Avenue businesses and property owners improve their parking lots, increase parking capacity and work out shared parking arrangements.

Overall, the city is spending \$1 million on the program, which also includes stormwater management improvements in alleys, residential buffers and other upgrades along the corridor.

University Avenue will lose 85 percent of its street parking to the 11-mile Central Corridor light rail project, which will connect the downtowns of St. Paul and Minneapolis; construction is slated to begin next year and LRT service is set to start in 2014.

The estimated price for the Central Corridor project now sits at \$914 million, though Peter Bell, head of the Metropolitan Council, which is overseeing the project, has repeatedly said the price tag needs to come down in order for the project to qualify for vital federal dollars.

All University Avenue businesses are eligible to compete for the loans, but the program will give priority to businesses in 11 "critical areas" most affected by parking losses, according to a city news release.

Under the new program, eligible businesses can apply for as much as \$25,000 for parking lot improvements if their business is the sole user of the lot. For shared parking agreements, there is no limit to what they can apply for.

"Basically, we are trying to incentivize the people to share the parking," said Samantha Henningson, a spokeswoman for St. Paul City Councilmember Russ Stark of the 4th Ward. Stark and 1st Ward City Councilmember Melvin Carter joined Mayor Chris Coleman in announcing the new program.

Shared parking will be fine for some people, but it won't come close to replacing the 1,000 or so street parking spaces that will be eliminated, according to Jack McCann, a University Avenue business owner and president of the board of the University Avenue Business Association. Moreover, some businesses rely on the direct access that on-street parking provides, he said.

The new program will make some people happy, but the city is "not addressing the problem that has everybody freaking out," which is the lack of on-street parking, said McCann, who owns the Midtown Commons, just east of Hwy. 280 near Raymond and University avenues, and stands to lose 12 street parking spaces.

"Throwing money at that problem doesn't solve the main problem."

Recommendations and reaction

The loan program stems from a joint St. Paul/Met Council report called "Mitigating the Loss of Parking in the Central Corridor." Released in April, the report calls for improved management of on-street parking, new technology, better signage and forgivable loans to improve parking lots.

Under terms of the forgivable loan deal, the business would not have to pay the money back as long as it keeps the parking in place for at least seven years, according to Henningson.

It's not clear now many off-street parking spaces could be added through the program. But in some of the critical areas it would be possible to have a "net addition of spots above and beyond the spots lost on the street," according to city officials.

Some parking lots can gain spaces by making simple changes, such as sharing a trash bin or removing curb cuts, Henningson said.

"I talked to a business owner who figured out he could gain five or six spaces at his business just by rearranging things," she said.

Linda Winsor, a spokeswoman for the University Avenue Business Association, said the loan program is a "positive step in the right direction.

Earlier this year, UABA released a "position statement" calling for a plan and money for "off-street parking solutions," followed by an origin-destination study to monitor traffic flow "before, during and after" light rail construction.

UABA's statement also supports a "re-evaluation of the street programming," based on the origin-destination study, and "goals for supporting a multi-modal, pedestrian-friendly corridor."

Shared parking arrangements aren't as easy as they may seem. On some parts of University Avenue there's ample off-street parking, but owners are reluctant to share spaces unless there is shared responsibility for maintaining the spaces.

"There is no such thing as free parking," said Winsor, whose group has been working with Council members Stark and Carter and other officials on parking concerns. "Hard and fast shared parking means that you figure out different peak times and figure out shared prices to pay for it."

Utility relocation crews are already at work in parts of downtown St. Paul, setting the stage for next year's kick-off of the Central Corridor construction.

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