



## Critics assail downtown Utica parking plan

City wants raze building, close part of Park Avenue

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UTICA — A city-backed plan to alleviate downtown parking woes includes several controversial elements.

Among them: razing the former HSBC building on Seneca Street and also closing a section of Park Avenue to add more parking for nearby government buildings.

The plan includes the construction or expansion of five parking lots and would add roughly 450 parking spaces.

All this is the result of the breakdown of plans for a proposed 270-space parking garage fronting Bleecker and Charlotte streets.

The garage plan – once considered by Mayor David Roefaro as his foremost downtown initiative – was scuttled after years of delays and the realization it could cost \$10 million or more to build. The city spent about \$560,000 in state money on architects, engineers and consultants before making that determination.

The new plan will require city Urban Renewal Agency takeover of several private parcels – and forecasts financial and logistical partnerships with Oneida County for the lots nearest county buildings.

The idea is not without critics.

Pamela Jardiu, a member of the Landmarks Society of Greater Utica who also is involved in the Rust to Green Utica project, questioned whether a professional analysis is needed to determine the need for surface parking downtown.

She said the removal of taxable properties for publicly owned lots could have negative effects.

And Paula Horrigan, a Cornell University professor and one of the overseers of the Rust to Green Utica project, said more surface parking is the opposite direction in which cities are going. She pointed out the Utica Master Plan still is in draft form, and called it a “shortsighted, inappropriate approach.”

“I would like to know what the city is doing to encourage creative investors who want to take a risk on a city where there is not a lot of vitality,” she said. “I cannot believe parking is the main issue.”

Randy Soggs, city Urban and Economic Development commissioner, said the lack of parking has been a stumbling block in selling the Harza Building, owned by the Utica Industrial Development Agency.

The current plan, he said, makes the most sense for the needs, and roughly \$4 million in state money that is available.

“We chose what we thought was available and in reasonable proximity to those areas of need,” he said.

Doable projects

The process has no timeline, but Soggs hopes most of it is under way this year. The path of least resistance appears for now to go through the three smallest lots. Those include:

• Fifteen spaces on the corner of Bleecker and John streets on land owned by the city.

• Forty-five spots at the corner of Charlotte and Bleecker streets on land owned by Charles N. Gaetano.

• Almost the whole block of Charlotte Street across from the Oneida County Court House, aside from The Devereux bar and restaurant, which could yield 105 parking spaces. County Executive Anthony Picente, however, said the county’s participation in that lot would not happen without the closure of Park Avenue.

The plan to close Park Avenue for parking gained serious consideration in 2007 before the Common Council decided not to vote on it.

It requires the approval of the Common Council and Oneida County Legislature to move forward.

Some of the concerns from four years ago have not changed – including that Park Avenue connects two of the city’s most historic parks: Chancellor Square Park and Rutger-Steuben Park.

“Why the push for all this stuff now?” said Michael Bosak, president of the Landmarks Society of Greater Utica. “Why not wait for a new administration to come in rather than make decisions that can’t be turned around.”

Bosak also expressed concern about the traffic flow on John and Rutger streets if Park Avenue is closed.

The plans call for a walking trail where the road once was to keep the connectivity between the parks, Soggs said. It would result in about 90 new spaces, up from the roughly 500 currently there.

Common Councilman Frank Vescera, whose First Ward covers downtown and who also chairs the Urban and Economic Development Committee, said he'd like to see the road closed for several weeks before any more permanent construction is done. That would give a sense of how disruptive the closure would be.

Picente said studies done four years ago still would be usable.

"Nothing will work for us unless we have Park Avenue," he said. "I don't even want to talk about Charlotte Street unless we can do the Park Avenue plan."

Utica resident Tasha Neal, 30, said she sees the sense in the plan.

"It's crazy around here," she said. "It takes awhile to find parking."

### HSBC Building

The proposal to purchase and raze the HSBC Building for parking has garnered significant controversy – as people from Bosak to members of the Common Council to downtown business owners have weighed in against it.

A recent tour of the building proved it was structurally sound, according to engineering reports, but also in a significant state of disrepair. Soggs said it could cost millions to rehab the building, and that the likelihood is it languishes until the city takes it over in future years when the money no longer is available for parking.

The building is owned by Ronald Prince, of California, who purchased it in 2009 for \$250,000. Prince is seeking to it back to the city at \$350,000, which he said would recoup his expenses since he owned it.

Roefaro said Soggs' plan is "in the best interests of the city" and that the parking garage project was too expensive. He said it's necessary to move now if the city is to sell the Harza Building to a private developer.

"You can't have jobs downtown if you don't have parking for them," Roefaro said. "This is a parking plan I believe really works for downtown."

Presented with criticism on the timing of the plan – when a new mayor is about a half-year away, the mayor said his responsibility is to following plans he believes in.

"We can't keep on worrying about who's going to be there next to have a cohesive plan in place," he said.

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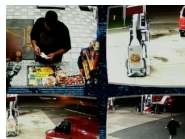


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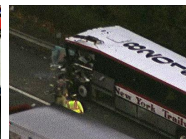
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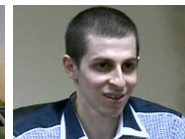
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