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How we get around and where we park

New studies to look at delicate issues

By MICAH MAIDENBERG
Editor

New studies of transportation and parking in the South Loop and parking in the West Loop could help guide future planning efforts in the two neighborhoods.



File 2008

The city's Department of Transportation is paying a firm called TranSystem \$380,000 with federal and tax increment financing dollars for the South Loop study. The transportation department has disbursed \$200,000 for the consulting firm HNTB to look at parking in the West Loop.

Parking and complaints about traffic congestion historically have been contentious issues in both neighborhoods, and changes, if any, recommended in these two studies could ultimately prove equally controversial. Area aldermen-Robert Fioretti in the South Loop and parts of the West Loop, and Walter Burnett in the West Loop-asked for the studies, according to the city office.

Details about the efforts are relatively scarce, as the South Loop study has yet to begin and the West Loop effort has only just started.

An 'overall' look in the South Loop

Sam Strain, an aide to Fioretti, who represents much of the Near South Side, said the South Loop study would account for current and future development to provide an "overall look" of parking issues and the local transportation network.

The area under consideration is bound by Congress on the north, the Stevenson Expressway on the south, Lake Shore Drive to the east and the Chicago River to the west.

The study could usher in changes to the area's residential parking zones. There are currently 13 different parking zones in the study area, according to a list Strain provided.

"The residential permit program was piecemealed together," said Strain. "It wasn't looked at in a comprehensive manner."

Strain said the alderman's office wants to condense the zones and create "sensible boundaries" for the ones that remain. He noted that older neighborhoods tend to have zones that encompass six to eight blocks.

Some residential parking zones in the South Loop appear start and stop in a random fashion, according to a list Chicago Journal obtained from the city clerk's office. Thirteen-hundred to 1599 S. Indiana, for example, is in zone 394. Then zone 599 takes over starting in the 1600 block of S. Indiana, and travels all the way to Cullerton.

Between 210 and 234 E. Cullerton is zone 938, but then 1145 covers 300 to 345 E. Cullerton, according to the list.

"There hasn't been an overall strategy when it comes to permit parking and commercial parking," Strain said.

The study will also address overall parking capacity, the needs of businesses and loading and standing areas.

The transportation aspect of the study will examine everything from bike lane placement to new stop signs to how traffic flow. Maria Casteneda, a transportation department spokeswoman, added that the consultants will measure travel times along main north-south corridors during morning and evening rush hours and identify where cars back up into queues, waiting to move.

Casteneda said lane configuration along arterial streets, stop light synchronization and pedestrian and bike issues will also be examined.

Addressing the 'day trippers?'

Casteneda said the West Loop parking study will examine parking between Halsted, Ashland, Randolph and the Eisenhower Expressway. The consultant, she explained, will inventory current parking options on the streets and in private developments.

The West Loop has a variety of parking challenges, including so-called "day trippers," non-residents who park on non-metered streets in the morning and commute into the Loop via bus or foot, older residential buildings that have no dedicated parking, and institutions like union halls that have their own specific needs.

Casteneda said the study will ask whether "park-and-ride" facilities could be created for the day trippers.

One proposal to deal with the parking issue has languished in part because of ward politics and neighborhood disagreement. Jeff Taylor chaired a parking committee for the West Loop Community Organization, which came up with what he called a "global" view on neighborhood parking that would take residential, business and institutional needs into consideration.

Some residents spoke against it, and during a 2nd Ward aldermanic debate last year between Fioretti and former Alderman Madeline Haithcock, both politicians declined to back it, according to the Chicago Journal archive.

In a recent interview, Fioretti called the proposal "nonsensical"-a blanket approach to neighborhood parking. He claimed he wasn't for or against it, however.

"At the time, I was opposed to that and probably still am," Fioretti said.

Taylor said the new parking study could help verify and quantify the parking problems in the West

Loop, adding much-needed data to his group's proposal.

The group's proposal has two parts. First, the West Loop organization suggested extending metered parking on east-west streets like Washington, Madison, Monroe, Adams, Jackson and Van Buren, except on streets that are primarily residential. More meters during business hours could help neighborhood retailers, the proposal says.

The second part called for residents to request residential permit parking on north-south streets in the neighborhood, with perhaps some exceptions, like on streets where meters were already installed.

Neighborhood street parking continues to deteriorate, said Taylor.

"You have more competition every year for the same amount of space," he said.

Taylor said no one has been willing to spend the political capital to push through a new parking plan.

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