

Conclusions to Broaden the Debate

There is a large shortage of parking in the South Grand Business District. The success of the district and the high density of floor area in the historic commercial buildings in the district have combined with the absolute auto-dependent nature of people today to make the original historic land planning of the area obsolete. As it now exists, there is just not enough land in the area to park all of the cars that are likely if all of the uses are occupied and successful. Vacancies of some office and retail spaces are evidence of the parking problem, as business owners have told of prospective tenants that have gone elsewhere due to the lack of parking in the district. If the South Grand Business District is to remain competitive in the region, and desires to attract high quality tenants, the district will need to improve parking conditions as soon as possible.

The parking solutions proposed in this study present a systematic approach to create new parking over time to gradually improve the amount of parking available per square foot of business area. Some of the solutions are small and independent enough that small business owners can implement them when the adjoining residential property is put on the market. In fact, residential property owners that are within the designated areas will have a whole new market of potential buyers for their homes since they have potential for use by the Business District as shown in this plan. As implementation proceeds, the City will need to assure that there are no “leap frog” developments that attempt to place parking on a residential lot if it is not directly contiguous to the back of the business district property. Development of these parking solutions must begin with the properties closest to the business district and work outward without skipping over an existing residential lot.

What is certain, it will take a large and coordinated community effort to achieve the parking solutions shown in this plan. The coordination will involve residents, business owners, City agencies and elected officials. The City of St. Louis, like so many older cities, has been losing the competition with its surrounding suburbs for the last 50 years. All successful major retail shopping malls are in the suburbs, and retail development is heavily weighted to growth in the suburbs. Residential populations continue to move to the suburbs in the St. Louis region. Due to this suburban orientation, when developers finally come to a successful urban commercial district such as South Grand, they bring their suburban design and planning approach with their project.

Ironically over these last 50 years which encompass the of decline of urban America, all owners of urban real estate, whether they are residents or business owners, have been subsidizing their suburban competition through the Federal Highway program. Every day for the last 50 years, urban land owners that drive a car are paying fuel taxes that largely pay for developing projects like the 16 lane width I-55 south at Arnold, the Highway 141 outer belt, multiple bridges with rush hour sized multi-lane widths to St. Charles County, or the billion dollar Page Avenue Extension. Billions of infrastructure dollars have been spent in the name of economic development of suburban and rural America. Most likely, urban land owners do not need or ever use these highway systems at peak rush periods. Business owners and residents around the South Grand Business District should work together to attract additional State and Federal funding to assist the economic development of all Town Center, Main Street or other urban styled commercial areas in the City.

The local conflict should change from the fractured resident versus business owner debate over demolition of homes to a much bigger picture debate of equitable distribution of Federal Funding for economic development, since that is exactly what the massive Federal Highway system is all about. The suburbs would be impossible with out a subsidized highway system. It is these last 50 years of bias funding that has suburbanized American thinking and lifestyles to the detriment of urban commercial districts and neighborhoods. Unify; work together to change the public policies that cause all places like the South Grand Business District to struggle to grow and compete regionally.