

Parking consultants to be counting spaces in downtown Amherst to assess need



Consultants from Nelson\Nygaard will be in Amherst looking at parking availability and usage. (Republican file)



By **Diane Lederman** | dlederman@repub.com

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AMHERST - Parking, like the New England weather, is often a topic of chatter.

Some have said there's not enough downtown and others that people don't use what's available because they don't know it is there.

Now, following the **three parking** forums held last year to look at parking needs, the town has hired Nelson\Nygaard **Consulting Associates** to collect data.

What officials lean "will inform the next several steps," said senior planner Jeff Bagg.

Consultants will be in town three times for data collection – on Saturday, a Thursday and April 23 when events such as the farmer's market and Daffodil Days will be held on the Town Common along with activities on the University of Massachusetts campus.

This way, they can see a typical Thursday and Saturday as well as what peak usage might look like.

Consultants were initially expected in town Thursday but with the rain, they will conduct the first research Saturday and return on another Thursday, Bagg said. Rain can alter the results.

Bagg said, consultants will provide the town with an updated parking inventory as well as making making two hour loops to look at how the spaces are used.

They'll also be doing so-called intercepts where they'll ask people three questions to augment data.

A parking survey will also be posted and is expected to be **available online** Thursday.

The last parking study was **completed in 2008**, with the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission parking report. At that time there were 2,019 spaces in the downtown area.

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The town has lost a few spaces since then, Bagg said.

And the town has since grown with more housing downtown and more to be coming when **One East Pleasant** Street is built and adds about 80 more apartments.

According to that report, "data collected suggests that the current parking supply in the downtown area sufficiently meets the current parking demand."

The town hopes the report will see if that's still true.

Some want the town to build a new parking garage.

The study is being funded with \$40,000 from the Transportation Fund.

In 2014, former Gov. Deval Patrick had announced \$1 million in grant money for communities to study and implement parking management plans but Gov. Charlie Baker cut the funding in February 2015 after the town had already started work looking at parking needs.

The late Town Manager John P. Musante believed the work should continue with the town picking up the cost, Bagg said.

"This is exciting. We really need the information to move forward," he said.

In the meantime, the Select Board has approved the charge for the Downtown Parking Working Group but has not yet appointed members.

New signs directing people to parking lots will be put up soon, Bagg said.

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