

2011

Parking & Congestion in Grand Bend



Glen Baillie

Grand Bend & Area Chamber of Commerce

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Parking and Congestion in Grand Bend

Summary of Round Table Discussions held August 29, 2011

Executive Summary

Background

A series of three meetings were facilitated by the Grand Bend and Area Chamber of Commerce on August 29, 2011. These discussions generated feedback from a cross-section of residents, municipal politicians, and business owners relative to the issues of Traffic Congestion, Parking, and Pay in Lieu Parking.

Approximately 60 people participated in round table discussions. The concerns, complaints, and suggestions were documented and summarized in the attached pages.

Problem Summary

Congestion

Residents, Visitors, and Businesses view traffic congestion as a *major issue* during the summer tourist season. Residents often must contend with up to thirty minute wait times to travel the short distance from Huron Woods to Main Street. Consequently many residents have expressed the feeling they are “trapped” in their subdivisions on weekends.

Local residents, cottagers, and visitors alike cite traffic congestion as a major reason they do not patronize Grand Bend businesses during the summer. This is clearly a huge issue for business if customers are unable/unwilling to get into town and patronize their business. Visitors are frustrated by long waits to get to, or pass through Grand Bend.

Traffic congestion is also a significant inhibitor to residential and business growth. Who wants to live in or open a business in a town with serious congestion problems? Inhibitors to residential and business growth are inhibitors to tax assessment growth.

Parking

Parking is another problem that is consistently raised as a significant issue by residents, businesses and visitors. It is also cited as a major reason people do not patronize Grand Bend businesses during the summer, and is uniformly viewed as a *significant deterrent* to enjoyment, prosperity and growth in Grand Bend.

The parking issue has many components, including a shortage of peak season spaces, parking fees, bylaw enforcement, payment methods, dates/times of enforcement, and so on. These components are discussed in detail in the following pages.

Conclusion

The recent upgrades to the Beach and Main Street Streetscape represent significant strides forward, improving Grand Bend's image and reputation as a Premium Tourism Destination. As a result, we are witnessing positive change in Tourist demographics, enjoying many favourable comments from residents and visitors, and are receiving positive reviews from the tourism and travel community at large.

Parking and traffic congestion, however, are long standing issues in Grand Bend, and must be addressed in order to fully realize the potential of these significant investments, retain existing businesses, residents and visitors, and attract new growth in the future. They are strongly viewed as "quality of life" issues for our residents, and survival and growth issues for our business community.

The following pages examine these issues in detail, and outline detailed recommendations on both of these issues. Some elements are inexpensive and easy to resolve and others will require a longer term approach.

The business community and residents of Grand Bend strongly recommend that Council consider the issues and recommendations carefully, and prioritize them for near term future resolution.



Congestion

There are significant traffic backups in the summer. Fridays before a long weekend, every Saturday from June until Labour Day, and nearly every Sunday have a line of cars stretching at best from downtown to the Catholic Church, and at worst, to Klondyke Road. This is estimated to happen on 23 days. These should be the 23 busiest days for merchants, but in many instances, turns into the slowest.

The congestion occurs in two locations, first the area near the Tim Horton's drive through, and second, the section of Highway 21 south from Highway 81 to Klondyke Road. The knock on effects of the congestion was highlighted by several people:

1. High volume of traffic taking shortcut through Southcott Pines, often speeding.
2. Immediate decline in sales in businesses along Highway 21 and Main Street One large vendor reported \$3,000 per hour in lost sales. Another and another reported the same thing, at a lesser pace. This business is gone, not to be made up.
3. Pedestrian access crossing the highway is inadequate and dangerous. The situation at Merrywood, the LCBO, and Tim Horton's was highlighted.

4. The bridge on Highway 21 remains inadequate as a pedestrian crossing. There is a need for an extra turn lane. The current turn lane is often empty in both directions.

Recommendations

1. Safety concerns for pedestrians must be addressed. The core needs to be connected to the area south of town, and the east side residents must be able to safely cross to the west side. This requires:
 - a. Three pedestrian crosswalks over Highway 21 at Merrywood, the LCBO and Tim Horton's.
 - b. Covered pedestrian walkways on either side of the bridge on Highway 21. This will facilitate comfortable and safe pedestrian access into our downtown core, and free up a traffic lane should the bridge get renovated.
2. Northbound traffic must be improved through whatever means possible in the short and long terms. Possible changes are:
 - a. Change the lane markings to have two lanes northbound. There is time to try this as an experiment in the years preceeding a bridge reconstruction.
 - b. Reconstruct the bridge to eliminate the sidewalks.
 - c. Develop a second crossing over the river with a connection between Gill Road, and Pinedale Road. for non truck traffic.

All the congestion related problems require changes to Highway 21. This means a meaningful working relationship must be developed with MTO. The Chamber of Commerce sees this as a number one priority.



Parking

Hourly Metered Parking

The installation of meters on Main Street eliminated the difficulties of business owners and day use beach visitors clogging up a commercial area. The installation of meters is not a solution without its own set of problems, as outlined below:

1. Exact change is required.
2. Minimum amount of time and money is not widely advertised or understood
3. Location of meters is not immediately apparent, in part because of their unobtrusive look.
4. Ticket price for over staying is the same as for more serious by-law breaches.
5. Retailers report a drop in store traffic from the locals.

Recommendations

1. Meters must be adapted to take electronic payment.
2. QR codes, the smartphone type barcode must be used widely downtown. It can be painted on curbs and on the parking meters. The information can then be easily communicated to all who own a smartphone.
3. Colour code each different type of parking space to reflect hourly, day use, and/or free lots. This will facilitate marketing efforts to fix issues identified later.
4. Parking ticket prices need to be set lower than tickets for illegal parking in other areas such as Plan 24. Tickets should also have a handout map showing alternative parking places, and general, positive town info.
5. Validation options must be developed for merchants to have a “free” parking option for their customers.
6. Lowest cost for metered parking must be part of the signage to encourage main street visitors.



Shortage of Parking Spaces

Hot weekends see a huge influx of people into the downtown. The main lots fill up well before noon, and visitors must park wherever they can. This results in private lots being used, roadways partially blocked, or visitors just leaving our area altogether.

1. Overcrowding onto roadways limits emergency vehicles.
2. Traffic backs up trying to get into beach lots which are already full.
3. Blocked driveways and roads cause unwelcome conflicts with residents and by-law staff.
4. Visitors just leave, or don't come back. No visitors, no business. No business, no growth. No growth, no jobs.

Recommendations

1. The electronic sign must be utilized for live lot conditions. When all the downtown lots are full, the sign must give alternates. Town staff to update regularly.
2. Free lots must be signed. The Gill lot is often near empty when cars are parked on the side of Highway 81.
3. Angle parking installed on the north side of 81 Crescent Street and the north side of River Road, past the yacht club. Estimated gain of 60 spaces.
4. Overnight parking to be allowed with advance purchase of pass. (Eilber Street and Huron Street lots only). This can bring in revenue while getting excess cars out of the Plan 24 area. No sleeping ban to stay.
5. Overflow lots must be developed with partnerships between property owners and the municipality. Town staffed and with revenue split with the owner. Suggested sites include the Legion area on Sundays, the Churches on Saturday.

6. Weekly and seasonal parking passes to be advantageously priced for merchants and renters. These passes are for the less busy lots only.
7. Variable pricing should be enacted. Lots closest to the beach pay the most, and more so on weekends.
8. A parking authority with one manager in charge should be established. The revenue and expenses should be published as a separate financial report, showing the attendant expenses. Any surplus should be devoted to land acquisition. A separate balance sheet approach is likely to generate more support if parking fees are seen to support future use.
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Pay in Lieu Parking Fees

A by-law charging \$1,000 for each parking space deemed necessary for a land use has been charged for many years. The same fee in Forest is \$200. A recent development had the fee waived. The merchants who have paid the fee have had their asset value impaired

Recommendations

1. The municipality needs to publicly identify the downtown area as part of a Community Improvement Program. When properly advertised, the forgiving of parking and related fees can be used as an incentive to businesses to invest in stores and businesses on the strip.
2. Merchants who have paid the fee should be given both assurances they have a valid asset and an acknowledgement of the desire for fairness. This can take the form of several free parking spaces in adjoining areas, or in making several free pay in lieu spots available should expansion take place in the near future. Both solutions pay tribute to the contributions these businesses make to our community.



Summary and Related Items

Our parking problems can be fixed and the solutions can be multi dimensional. The acquisition of new lots can be done in conjunction with planning for a community center and a new arts programming venue.

The installation of covered sidewalks hanging beside the bridge can be a tourist attraction, increase our residents physical activities, and alleviate traffic back ups. Providing for overnight parking in public lots can take the pressure off overcrowded neighbourhoods, and reduce impaired driving.

Our recommendations stand on their own as actions with an immediate positive return. The Chamber of Commerce sees the need for progress on the related issues of Congestion and Parking. We have a way forward that properly implemented will increase the access to and enjoyment of the downtown area for residents and visitors alike.

It is imperative our municipal council develop a working plan to implement the recommendations, with a timetable which reflects an urgency to get the job done.