

OP-ED

Rick Longinotti: Choices for a vibrant downtown

The goal of building the proposed five-story parking garage on the site of the farmers market is to provide more customer parking for that section of downtown. Fortunately, there is a greener, less costly alternative than building the garage. The key to this alternative rests in the following reality: over 60 percent of the 3,067 city-operated parking spaces in downtown Santa Cruz aren't available for customers. They are occupied by parking-permit holders and all-day parking.

The blueprint for the alternative already exists in the city's Master Transportation Study MTS. The city and UC Santa Cruz paid \$500,000 for the 2003 study, but has not yet implemented its recommendations. Some of MTS recommendations:

- Prioritize customer parking over all-day parking in surface lots and meters. This would be accomplished through appropriate pricing policies and through moving all permit parking to the existing multi-story garages.
- Financial incentives for employee use of alternative transportation. That could include subsidized bus passes, emergency ride home taxi vouchers, cash, credit at bike stores, car sharing, discounted permits for carpooling, etc.
- Park & Ride lots with shuttle service for downtown employees.
- Trip reduction ordinance for new developments.

City staff estimate the cost of the proposed garage to run \$42 million over the 30-year term of the debt. Many downtown business owners have begun to question whether the 484 net new parking spaces might be more costly than supporting 484 downtown employees to use alternative transportation. Wouldn't that be a win for customers and a win for our environment? It would also be a win for employees whose real wages are declining with high gas prices, and who could put money back in their pockets with the financial incentives.

The concept for the garage has been around for more than 20 years. And that's the problem: 20 years ago, not many of us understood that world oil production would begin to decline, even as demand for oil continues to rise. With each percentage point gap between supply and demand, prices are expected to take huge jumps. With what we know now about the end of cheap oil, we should prepare for the inevitable transition to low-energy transportation. We should not assume that current quantities of vehicle use will continue and base a 30-year debt on that assumption.

The vitality of downtown and of our region will depend on our ability to anticipate the future and prepare for it. There is every reason to believe that this future can be bright, and in some ways more congenial than our current auto dependency. Let's take one step by requesting that the City Council at their Sept. 23 meeting replace plans for a garage with an innovative program to support green alternatives for downtown commuters.

For more info: www.sensibletransportation.org.

Rick Longinotti is a Santa Cruz resident.