

February 27, 2013

Bryan Meek
Norwalk Parking Authority Chairman
11 North Water Street
Norwalk, CT 06854

RE: South Norwalk Parking

Dear Mr. Meek:

A primary focus of my career as an architect has been the revitalization of the South Norwalk neighborhood, where I have completed approximately 200 projects. My work has included the design of Barcelona Wine Bar, Match, Ocean Drive, The Brewhouse, and The Loft. This effort played a significant role in the transformation of SoNo into the leading nighttime destination in the State of Connecticut by 2004. In 1990, there were rarely more than a dozen or so cars parked in the Webster Street lot at night, and by 2004, the lot was typically full during the evening hours. After many years of hard work, SoNo was happening.

This background has left me with a deeply embedded knowledge of the possibilities and challenges that our neighborhood faces. Unfortunately, the SoNo brand is fading. The urban ecology of this neighborhood has been, and remains, fragile. The collective efforts which helped rebrand SoNo as a hip, urban enclave have been negatively impacted over the last few years by public parking policies targeting SoNo as a primary source of revenue. As a direct result, there is dramatically reduced visitation to the district.

Throughout greater Fairfield County, SoNo has unfortunately now gained a reputation as a place where parking is a hassle. All of the tickets issued and the collective frustration and confusion about payment protocol has taken its toll. The same people, who for a brief time flocked to this neighborhood, now have a compelling reason to stay away. The neighboring municipalities of Westport, Darien, Wilton, and Fairfield have increased their restaurant offerings, and all offer free nighttime parking, putting SoNo at a distinct competitive disadvantage.

The Norwalk Parking Authority statistics for the Webster Street lot indicate that current demand is now less than half of what it was in 2008. This outcome was predicted in the 2011 South Norwalk Business District Retail Positioning Strategy and Work Plan by MJB Consulting, commissioned by the City of Norwalk. This study concluded that, "The cost of parking in SoNo has been driven in recent years by the Parking Authority's internal finances (i.e. debt service), rather than the true market value of the parking resource as determined by the consumer. Staying with the former approach will continue to impact on SoNo's competitiveness and viability as a business district."

Parking policies are severely damaging this community. The neighborhood is approaching a tipping point from which it could either descend beyond redemption, or be stabilized through proactive action. The current Parking Authority policies are unsustainable and extremely destructive to the tax base of this city and all the small businesses that helped to make SoNo successful.

I strongly urge the Parking Authority to revise their parking policies so they support the community rather than destroy it. If people no longer want to visit SoNo because of parking issues, then raising the rates is not a viable economic solution for the City.

Sincerely,

Bruce Beinfield FAIA