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Retailers Cheer Bosse For Helping Restore Parking To South Santa Monica

By Victoria Talbot

The Beverly Hills City Council has given the go-ahead to restore the parking meters on South Santa Monica Boulevard, on both sides of the street, after they were removed in 2016 so traffic could be rerouted to accommodate construction on North Santa Monica Boulevard.

“As a longtime retailer on Little Santa Monica Blvd, I would like to take this opportunity to laud our Councilmember and two-time Mayor Lili Bosse for rescuing us from desperation,” wrote Diane Kron of Kron Chocolatier, whose business was impacted by the lack of parking. “At the

City Council meeting, she was our knight in shining armor, understanding that parking must be restored if we are to survive! We all suffered devastating business losses when the meters were removed. The street became a nonstop speedway, the grit and grime increased, the noise level was unbearable at times. Customers went elsewhere because of parking difficulties and unpleasantness. As shop owners we want to survive & keep the charming ambience of Little Santa Monica Boulevard as it should be. Thank you to Lili for being our Champion!”

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When the decision to remove the parking to mitigate North Santa Monica construction was made, the City covered the meters but left them on the street with the promise that parking would be restored when construction was complete.

Then, the street was restriped with two lanes in each direction and left-turn pockets. South Santa Monica Boulevard became a thoroughfare, which has operated very effectively for the duration of construction, scheduled to be completed by the end of May or early June.

In the interim, however, the City has lost several businesses that suffered economically. Business owners have reported a steep decline in business, and many say they have been clinging to the promise that parking will be restored.

It almost did not happen, because City Staff, Iteris, Inc. traffic and parking consultants and the Traffic & Parking Commission (TPC) presented a plan that would have removed the parking from the south side of the street altogether, despite pleas from the businesses.

Their plan focused on moving traffic effectively, while adding parking – but only on the north side of the street.

Motorists have touted the improved traffic conditions, which have rerouted drivers off North Santa Monica Boulevard extremely effectively – so much so that many have expressed their desire to keep the modifications.

The “hybrid” plan was named because it incorporated elements from Traffic and Parking Commissioners and from several options presented by staff.

That plan would have had two 10-foot lanes westbound, two eastbound from Wilshire to Bedford, one 12-foot lane eastbound from Bedford to Beverly Drive, 44 parking spaces on the north side, removal of the eastbound left turn lane at Rodeo Drive, and a passenger loading zone that would accommodate 2-3 vehicles on the south side for loading and rideshare, in addition to the six loading zones created for the duration of the construction.

The plan would be efficient for smoothing traffic but not for business, say the merchants.

The City Council seemed poised to approve the plan, with Councilmembers Robert Wunderlich and Les Friedman commenting first.

Then Bosse spoke.

Bosse visited each one of the businesses on the south side of the street and asked them several questions.

Bosse’s poll of the businesses showed that every single one reported a decline in business they attributed to the loss of parking, and that all of them anxiously awaited the restoration of their parking meters.

The plan that was proposed by City Staff was termed a “pilot program,” a designation that would have allowed the City to avoid CEQA regulations and an Environmental Impact Report.

But when Bosse questioned Deputy Director of Transportation Aaron Kunz and Iteris Vice President Michael Meyer, it was learned that they had not done a circulation test to understand how that proposal would work.

For example, pointed out Bosse, how would a westbound Lyft driver be able to access a loading zone on the south side of the street, and what

impact would that have on traffic?

The vision merchants presented was for calming the speeding traffic, affording a “buffer zone” for pedestrians, reducing the noise, pollution, and the speeding that they feel, drives away shoppers. Only Yves Saint Laurent supported the hybrid solution, but their store has a valet in the alley to serve their clients. Bosse pressed for a date - which will be the end of May or beginning of June. She wants six weeks to get it done.

Merchants were thrilled.

Now they will have their meters returned, and crosswalk scrambles will be installed at Camden, Bedford and Rodeo to ease the right-turn burden. Staff was directed to seek solutions to “straighten out the street,” referring to the zig-zag pattern of meters.

Better Bikes blogger Mark Eliot actually took the City Council to task for not discussing the addition of bike lanes on South Santa Monica Boulevard.

His comments provoked a strong reaction from councilmembers who just awarded bike lanes on North Santa Monica Boulevard, demonstrating definitively that City Council supports cycling.

Business owner James Anderton, who opened WEST only months prior to discovering that the parking was to be removed, has been the face of the merchants for the duration. Anderton closed his store to attend daytime TPC meetings to represent his colleagues on the south.

“As a Beverly Hills merchant and resident, it was gratifying to see the City Council take action in a responsive manner and with urgency to the concerns of the merchants regarding the negative impacts of the loss of parking on our section of Little Santa Monica,” Anderton said. “It sends a positive message that the City government values the input and viability of the small businesses committed to establishing a presence in the golden triangle. I welcome the further ideas presented of developing a longer-term street vision that keeps Little Santa Monica ‘little’ and encourages a neighborhood vibrancy as other parts of LA have achieved in Larchmont, Abbot Kinney or along Montana Avenue.”

Or, as he said to Bosse, “Honest to goodness, your graceful but effective steering of the City Council last evening could serve as a masterclass on leadership.”

In a letter to support their position, the merchants of the south side of the street wrote: “The issue is not the mere existence of parking spaces, or the number of spaces on the street, but perhaps even more significantly the sidewalk ambiance that the lack of buffer parking spaces essentially destroys.”

The City is conducting workshops now for a “Complete Streets” vision that would accommodate all forms of mobility. Visions floated during the evening’s discussion included diagonal parking concepts, two-lanes instead of four, widening sidewalks and creating seating, and making South Santa Monica Boulevard a quintessential pedestrian element in the City.

Complete Streets will have a stall at the Farmers’ Market Earth Day event Sunday and residents are encouraged to stop by or to engage in some of the upcoming opportunities to make their thoughts known about streets. The City of Beverly Hills will be conducting extensive outreach on these issues.