Parking only area of agreement

Merchants split on urban renewal

By BOB FELL
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Although the hearing was “unofficial” on the downtown urban renewal redevelopment program Wednesday evening, members of the Local Public Agency (LPA) got some informal input from segments of the downtown business interests.

It was quite obvious that the merchants are not in agreement in what they want. The only objective in which there was agreement was parking — off-street parking to be provided from public funds, either urban renewal or parking meter revenues.

Spokesman for a group identified as the Downtown Improvement Association “or some similar name,” was Nate Horwitz. Horwitz said he was not the official spokesman for the group but said a number of merchants had been meeting informally to come up with suggestions for the downtown, up to most of which was the parking.

Bonnie Hughes, urban renewal relocation director, said an official group had been appointed to serve in the same capacity, following a meeting a year ago with most of the same merchants on hand Wednesday night. When none had volunteered for the job, the LPA appointed a nucleus of half a dozen downtown businessmen as an executive committee headed by Lloyd Pugh, said Mrs. Hughes.

Horwitz commented that “that is the problem”; the businessmen named by the LPA were not representative of the retail merchants.

At a subsequent meeting called by Pugh, which also included many of those present Wednesday night, there were no objections to giving the building held by Pugh the go ahead to come up with a plan.

One of the Pugh group’s recommendations was to clear the north side of the 600 and 700 blocks on Main. This was the issue up for discussion at the Wednesday meeting and is basic to downtown redevelopment, according to urban renewal officials.

A new development entered the picture, however, when Mike Whalen, owner of the old Harney Hotel site, announced plans for construction of a two-story retail store building on the site.

Both the Pugh group and the Horwitz group had considered the “Harney” site for off-street parking. Pugh’s group, however, at a recent meeting, had endorsed Whalen’s plan to build because it is “in keeping with the concept of urban renewal through private enterprise.”

If a new commercial building goes up on the Harney site, urban renewal would not acquire the property.

Horwitz said his group was opposed because it would eliminate land that had been planned for off-street parking.

Whalen told the LPA it is his policy to provide parking for his employees as well as his customers and that his plans include this.

Whalen received support from at least two downtown merchants, Lloyd Hamilton and Nel Seeley, who did not identify with either the Horwitz or Pugh groups.

Horwitz’ group suggested the city consider purchasing land on the south side of St. Joe in the middle of the 500 block for off-street parking. The city could use money from the Parking Lot and Area Fund for this, said Horwitz.

Pete Geyerman recommended the city appoint a board to handle parking facilities as provided under state law. The board would be responsible for providing and administering parking facilities and would be funded from 50 per cent of the revenue from parking meters.

Although Aldermen Bob Apa and Al Wilson, vice chairman of the LPA, mentioned it would take a combination of public and private funds to acquire some of the parking, not once was there any offer from the merchants to contribute to the cost of relieving the parking problem.

Horwitz and his group instead proposed the downtown off-street parking be provided from public funds.

Horwitz also reminded that the firm of THK Associates, urban development planners now retained by the city as consultants on urban renewal, had proposed a downtown redevelopment plan before the June 1972 flood.

He added that THK Associates had proposed a mall on St. Joe but had recommended that it not be done until there was adequate off-street parking in the downtown.

Leonard Swanson, urban renewal director, reported a new development which also might affect the plan to clear the 600 block on the north side of Main. The State Society for the Preservation of Historical Buildings has declared the site a historical site, which means the buildings might have to be preserved.

Swanson said that no final decision has been made, however.

At the conclusion of the “informal” hearing, the LPA set July 22 as the formal public hearing on the downtown redevelopment through urban renewal. After Wednesday’s meeting, however, it appears the July 22 meeting will be a token “public hearing” unless some agreement is reached among downtown merchants in the next 30 days.