

An open letter regarding Albany permit parking

**By Roger E. Benson,
PEF President**

Over the past two weeks, some media reports have portrayed PEF as intransigent on the permit-parking proposal, a portrayal that is both unfair and uninformed. I would like to set the record straight.

PEF is not opposed to a limited permit-parking plan that responds to the needs of downtown residents, but we do oppose a plan that ignores the needs of commuters.

The current bill for permit parking in Albany is the same legislation that the state Legislature has rejected every time it has been introduced. And with good reason. It's a bad bill. This bill would give the Albany Common Council sweeping powers to ban 80 percent of on street parking in every residential neighborhood in the city of Albany while completely ignoring the parking needs of commuters.

PEF's position on permit parking for Albany has remained unchanged since our August 1997 meeting with the *Times Union* Editorial Board. After that interview, they wrote the following in an editorial entitled "Progress on Parking":

"The leader of PEF moves in a constructive direction in the dispute between the unions and Albany residents. ... It's a lock that when it comes to parking, Mr. Benson will be tough negotiator. But it's encouraging that he's even talking about negotiating, rather than fighting it out in court."

I restated our position in a December 1998 letter to Albany Mayor Gerald Jennings in which I wrote:

"PEF will drop our opposition to a limited parking permit plan when replacement parking is constructed for the permit spaces and is made available to PEF

members, when the fee for those replacement spaces is comparable to existing state facilities and the peripheral shuttle bus system is significantly improved and expanded."

The construction of the Eagle Street garage was a dramatic move toward meeting our members' needs. After the garage was completed PEF made a written proposal to the Mayor of Albany suggesting the implementation of a limited permit plan covering the number of new spaces created by the new garage. Unfortunately, the city rejected our proposal, and instead responded with a permit plan that restricted parking on a significantly larger scale — essentially the same legislation the city now continues to propose two years later.

"PEF will never agree to any deal that ignores the interests of our members."

The Eagle Street garage was a significant step toward improving parking in Albany, but unfortunately the plan to revitalize downtown by relocating thousands of state employees there negated most, if not all, of the improvement generated by this new parking facility. Compounding the problem is the closure of the state's peripheral parking lot on Washington Avenue, inconsistent shuttle bus service, and **the potential relocation of another 5,000 employees to downtown once the Alfred E. Smith Building is renovated and the Harriman Office Campus is privatized.** It is now clear that rather than being the solution to the parking problem, the Eagle Street

garage was only a temporary fix to a bad situation that is only getting worse.

If the state and the city of Albany continue to relocate state employees downtown for redevelopment, and receive the economic benefits of that redevelopment, they should now ante up. City officials should stop complaining and agree to real solutions that address the parking problem, not aggravate it with one-sided proposals that only benefit the residents.

It has been estimated that nearly 50,000 people work in downtown Albany and most commute into and out of the city daily. For many state employees, **waiting lists for downtown parking are still in excess of ten years.** To respond to the flood of commuters with a bill that cuts off, for many, the only available downtown parking option — the city streets, is not the solution, either. How can PEF accept a bill that will make working conditions even worse for our members?

Over the past five years, PEF has met with numerous city and state officials in an attempt to find middle ground on this complex issue. We have been the only union to actually suggest a solution to the parking crisis in downtown Albany that considered the needs of all of the parties involved.

Our position has been consistent. We are open to a limited permit parking system; however, the plan must accommodate the parking needs of commuters as well as residents. PEF remains willing to join as an equal partner with the state, city representatives, and other impacted parties to develop a long-range, fair solution to the parking problem. But I can assure all the interested parties that we will aggressively defend the rights and needs of the employees we represent. This means PEF will never agree to any deal that ignores the interests of our members.



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