

Robert J Test
Attorney at Law
111 Oronoco Street
Alexandria, VA 22314

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1-8-13

Direct Dial: 703.837.9070

rjtestlaw@gmail.com

January 7, 2013

William D Euille, Mayor
Members of City Council
City of Alexandria
City Hall
Alexandria, Virginia

By Hand and Electronic Mail

RE: City-wide On-street Car-share Policy

Mr Mayor and Members of Council;

Regarding the proposed designation of parking spaces in the City for Car-share, and especially the designation of parking spaces in Old Town, please consider the following comments.

It is apparent that the City staff has a positive view of car share as an alternate means of local transportation. The car share concept is based upon the ability to meet the transportation needs of an individual by having a vehicle at hand, to be used for a limited time (measured in hours rather than days), and returned to the vendor with a minimum amount of administrative effort. There is an underlying assumption that if car share vehicles are plentiful and accessible private car ownership will decline. Vehicle owners whose needs are met by car share will no longer need a personal car. Which will, if I follow the reasoning, open parking spaces. (And those abandoned spaces will be designated and filled by the waiting car share drivers, who would otherwise be circling the block like the rest of us.)

Encouraging alternate forms of transportation in the City, and in Old Town in particular, is a laudable goal. As you know, there is a continuous tension between the residents of Old Town and the commercial interests to have access to on street parking. The City decision to implement the current hourly rate by the kiosk method has led to competition for non-metered parking for short term use. And those Old Town visitors who violate the kiosk imposed time limit incur the wrath of the parking gods, and collect a \$40.00 ticket for their careless behavior. (And on seeing that ticket an audible vow not to return to Old Town, thus freeing up more parking spaces!)

Here is where Hertz and Avis, (purchaser of Zipcar) come in. The two largest car rental companies in the world make money renting cars. If people want to rent cars for the short term, then Hertz and Avis will be there to serve the need. But the problem that Hertz and Avis would like this Council to solve is the problem created by Council in the first place - the Old Town parking fees and the \$40.00 overtime penalty. Hertz has tired of chasing down drivers to collect the \$40. (Drivers who give Hertz \$30 to rent a car for a long afternoon won't likely be paying a \$40 ticket.)

Car share solves the problem.

Mayor and City Council
January 7, 2013
page two

Convince City Council that designating parking spaces in Old Town (but no more than two per block!) is a good idea. "Carsharing is a Transportation Demand Management tool that is being used to reduce reliance on single occupancy vehicle travel." It gets people out of their personal cars and into the cars of Hertz and Avis; individually, as single occupancy vehicles. The general idea of car sharing is to rely on single occupancy travel, but on a selective basis. Not really a "car free lifestyle" but a "car (sharing) dependent" lifestyle.

Hertz and Avis agree to pay the City for the spaces, a fee that Hertz and Avis will build into their lease costs, no more of those pesky \$40 write offs. Everyone wins. Except the residents, who will see the designated parking spots generally vacant, except for weekends, when there is the greatest demand for on street parking, and Old Town businesses, that will suffer a corresponding lack of customers at the same time.

The City has an opportunity to take a huge step in implementing its parking policy based on the current kiosk meter system in Old Town. The theory: make on street parking attractive only for short stays, and encourage long term parking in garages, City owned and private. Put action to the theory. Allow Hertz and Avis, and any others, to pre-pay for the use of Old Town spaces only in the City owned or controlled garages. Why take on-street parking out of use when the City has a garage at its disposal? If that is too restrictive a requirement, then allow parking in private garages as well. City staff, working with private garage owners, should be able to come up with a simple way to reimburse garage owners for the car share use. Likely the garage owners would welcome the business.

How many spaces must the City designate as car sharing? If the vendors purchase 12, where will they be? Will car share drivers be able to move dormant bicycles from their valued bike share spots in the dead of winter and assume those spaces?

If the City is insistent on allowing on-street parking for Hertz and Avis customers, then provide them with handicapped type "car share parking" tags, allowing the driver to park in Old Town with impunity and without payment. In short, sell the parking tags, not the parking spaces. Give the driver the option of street or garage parking. (I have a handicapped tag on my rear view mirror and I drive and park frequently around and about Old Town. I would point out, however, that I am handicapped, not destitute. But I thank the City for its generosity!)

Finally, a suggested solution that falls in between car ownership and car sharing. The City licenses and approves taxi cabs and the rates charged. Cabs must be inspected and are subject to City oversight. If minds more creative than mine were able to marry the traditional taxi operation with the efficiency of Uber, the web based car service, many of the parking issues could be minimized.

Mayor and City Council
January 7, 2013
page three

I have used Uber frequently when I travel and find it a simple and efficient way to get around, especially in an unfamiliar city. Taxis require no additional parking, don't need designated spaces other than those already in place. They are familiar to visitors and residents, and their use should be encouraged. With a simple method to hire one, (text, e-mail, etc.) the use of taxi cabs would increase.

There is a very strong "feel good" element to car sharing, the seeming logic of the plan is hard to resist. But the truth of the matter is that companies that are in the business of renting cars want the City to provide their customers with prepaid designated parking in Old Town. There are other solutions to the parking issues of the car rental companies. Taking public spaces from the use of Old Town residents and visitors should not be one of them.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert J Test", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Robert J Test

RJT/ko