
Comment for the PB on MMC Parking Garage

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To: Helen Donaldson <hcd@portlandmaine.gov>

Fri, Jul 27, 2018 at 7:46 AM

Nell;

Please submit [this article](#) (below) I that I wrote to for the *Phoenix* to the Planning Board in regard to the MMC employee garage. (I removed part of the headline that I did not write but the whole headline is in the online text). This is my personal comment, but I'll try to wrangle a neighborhood association letter as well.

Thanks,

Zack

Maine Medical Center's planned parking garage reaches new heights and goes to great lengths, but aren't we in the depths of a housing crisis?

Zack Barowitz Apr 26, 2018

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Projected design from City of Portland Historical Preservation Board proposal [<http://www.portlandmaine.gov/AgendaCenter/ViewFile/Item/6106?fileID=33263>]

We interrupt the teeth-gnashing over Munjoy Hill condo heights to take you to the post-railway wilderness of Libbytown, where Maine Medical Center's 96-foot tall, 500-foot long, 2,500-stall employee parking garage is moving through the planning process.

This will be a massive structure, easily the biggest garage in Maine. Were it built for housing, it would hold roughly 1,000 apartments. It will sit in the vast parking lot next to the strip mall where old Union Station used to be and where Maine Hardware and Save-a-Lot supermarket are now.

The area where the proposed parking lot will stand is an interesting one. It's bounded on one side by the railroad tracks, Mercy Hospital, the hobo jungle, and the Fore River. On the other side it backs up to the buildings now lining St. John Street, from the Casco Aerie of the Fraternal Order of Eagles to the southern

end of the historic Maine Central Railroad General Office Building, currently housing a Margarita's Mexican Restaurant.

If you're having a hard time picturing the site, that's because most of its landmarks no longer exist, having been demolished in deference to the ongoing triumph of the automobile. But traces of the old fabric endure. Besides the Maine Central Railroad building, a few other railway-associated buildings linger throughout the area, including the Inn at St. John, an old railway hotel.

It is also an historic African-American neighborhood, which

Greater Portland Landmarks recently cited as threatened.

Pullman porters, the class of African-Americans who found work as train attendants after emancipation, settled there to be close to the train station. At least one family and a number of buildings significant to that history remain.

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The 1961 destruction of the granite, châteauesque Union Station is only the most infamous example of auto blight in the neighborhood. Further depredations include the demolition of homes to make way for I-295 (Exit 5) and the insertion of three Maine Med parking garages on Congress Street and one on Forest. Even city councilors and planning staff would be hard-pressed to say whether this latest garage site is in Libbytown or in the Saint John Valley neighborhood (which old-timers still call the West End). One thing is for certain: both cars and shit run downhill.

Critics of the approximately \$60 million project point to the large proportion of hospital employees who live within two miles of their workplace and the fact that the hospital charges only *\$6 per month* for employee parking, this amounts to an incentivization program to encourage employees to drive to work. It also translates to a payback period of over a thousand years for the garage (not including maintenance costs). While neither the hospital administration nor city planning staff have had the chutzpah to tout the project as beneficial for the city, the general line has been that it is "necessary" that one of the city's "core institutions" be able to maintain employees by providing ample parking.

But it is land-use decisions like this one that have driven up city housing costs and pushed hospital workers into outlying communities like Gorham and Scarborough, both of which have been growing at a double-digit rates far higher than Portland's rate of growth. This means that the garage will essentially subsidize those towns' lack of public transportation, pushing the burden onto Portland residents. Employees can drive in, use the infrastructure, cause traffic, drive home, and pay taxes to whatever town they're living in. In return, Portland gets virtually nothing in the way of tax revenue: being a non-profit, Maine Med is tax-exempt.

In a perfect city, East Brown Cow and Maine Medical Center would have seen the benefit of developing the garage site for 1,000 units of housing. This would shorten the commutes of Maine Med employees,

relieve the housing shortage, add to the tax rolls — and give succor to East End residents as Condomageddon looms over Munjoy Hill.

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