

EVANSTON ROUNDTABLE

Panel participants push back on safety, parking concerns

Officials say during League of Women Voters event there's important context to both issues



by [Alex Harrison](#)
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Former Cook County Commissioner Larry Suffredin (standing) introduces a panel discussion on the economic state of downtown Evanston at a Saturday luncheon hosted by the League of Women Voters of Evanston. Credit: Alex Harrison

During a Saturday luncheon event hosted by the League of Women Voters of Evanston, local stakeholders pushed back on common perceptions about safety and parking issues in downtown Evanston.

Several dozen residents packed the back two rooms of Koi Fine Asian Cuisine, 624 Davis St., to hear the panel discussion on the economic state of the downtown business district over a buffet lunch. While attendees ate, former Cook County Commissioner Larry Suffredin asked panelists about leading concerns identified by the League in a recent focus group study.

Suffredin said the top concern identified was safety, with most respondents naming it their first or second highest concern for downtown. Andy Vick, executive director of the Downtown Evanston Special Service Area, said he and his staff work closely with business owners and the Evanston Police Department to track and respond quickly to any incidents or negative trends.

Vick cautioned not to “blow it out of proportion,” though, and said not all perceptions of safety risks translate to genuine problems or dangerous behavior.

“We are a small urban community, so there are going to be issues, there’s no doubt about it,” Vick said. “It’s something we’re cognizant of, something we’re working on, but I continue to feel that this, in general, is a safe place to work, to do business and to recreate.”

Security a ‘non-issue’

Jim Hill, president of Farnsworth-Hill, an Evanston property management company, shared that security is a “non-issue” for prospective retail tenants he’s spoken to, and Evanston Made Founder Lisa Degliantoni said the artists she’s worked with over the last decade have never had major issues with theft or personal safety at events downtown.

Northwestern University undergraduate Aimee Resnick said she’s never felt unsafe or uncomfortable downtown, and said any approaches to safety should be based in care rather than stigma.

“I struggle a little bit with the idea of problematizing individuals with mental illness in our community, and seeing them as perhaps an eyesore or an issue to handle,” Resnick said. “If we really want to address so-called safety in Evanston, or perhaps just the wellbeing of these

individuals, we need to provide better wraparound services and care that can connect individuals to the care they need.”

Parking problems?

Suffredin said the other leading concern from the focus groups was parking, particularly the metered payments required in public lots and garages. Opponents of paid parking often point out that neighboring communities like Wilmette as well as Skokie’s Old Orchard Mall have free parking, making Evanston’s paid system a disadvantage.

Vick called paid parking “a reality” for Evanston as a small city, as downtown needs to “generate churn” on parking to make space for new customers to come in. Dan Kelch, who has owned restaurants downtown for more than 30 years under Core & Rind Hospitality, went further and said free parking is “a fallacy, it doesn’t exist.”

He said shoppers at Old Orchard pay for the mall’s lots through “common area maintenance” charges added to the price of goods by the mall’s merchants.

“There’s no little parking fairy that comes down and pays their property tax for that huge parking lot, does their maintenance, paints their lines, fixes their potholes,” Kelch said. “Everything you buy, that parking charge is built into that cost. And it’s probably, on a dollar-for-dollar basis, more expensive than what you’re gonna see here in Evanston.”

At recent City Council and ward meetings, some residents have asked how downtown parking will be affected by City Hall operations moving into a leased space at 909 Davis St. as early as June, as council members determine the fate of the Morton Civic Center.

After Saturday’s panel discussion, Vick told the RoundTable he isn’t worried about the move driving parking scarcity, citing the building’s location between Metra and CTA train stations and the nearby parking garage on Maple Avenue. Instead, he said he’s confident the move will have a positive impact on the downtown economy.

“That’s a lot of new people who are going to be having lunch downtown, and doing their shopping downtown and getting their services downtown,” Vick said. “I think it’s a great gift for downtown, so I’m really excited that [the city is] relocating there.”