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New pilot program offers valet parking on Temple Street

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Andy Bromage, Register Staff
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-NEW HAVEN — Finding on-street parking downtown on weekends can be like hunting the elusive black rhino in the Serengeti — nothing but Rams, Impalas and Cougars as far as the eye can see.

But starting Wednesday, restaurant and theater patrons will have the option of paying \$10 to have a professional valet park their cars for them in a nearby garage. The city is launching a pilot program that will designate two strips of Temple Street as valet zones. The locations are Temple and Chapel near the Omni New Haven Hotel at Yale, and Temple and George, near the Criterion Cinemas.

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City Traffic and Parking Director Paul Wessel said downtown's restaurant and theater boom is shrinking the supply of on-street parking and hopes valet parking will get more cars off the street and into underutilized garages.

"Many of us don't like parking garages," Wessel said. "We don't like going in, going up, going around. But if we could hop out curbside and have someone park for us, we'd be all for it."

The city has contracted with Pro Park of Hartford to run valet service from 11 a.m. to midnight Monday through Friday and from 5 p.m. to 4 a.m. Saturdays and Sundays. The idea is to offer valet service during the weekday lunch rush and on weekends, when nightclubs and theaters, such as Criterion and the Shubert, draw hundreds of thrill-seekers downtown.

The valet parking rate will be \$5 per hour, or part thereof, and a maximum of \$10 per stay. Self-parking in a city or privately owned garage runs drivers anywhere from \$3 to \$10 a night, Wessel said.

Pro Park will pay to bag 10 metered spaces, at a rate of \$75 per space per month: four spaces near the Omni and six spaces alongside a surface parking lot operated by Pro Park at Temple and George streets.

Wessel said his office will review the valet program in three months to decide whether to make it permanent.

"We want to see what it looks like, what it smells like," Wessel said. "Do we like it? Does the public like it? Does the industry like it? It occurs to us the time is right, and we want to see if we're right."

Pro Park Vice President Joe Coppola said his valets will be "on-street ambassadors," helping drivers get quickly and safely to their show or dinner reservation.

Sports

"Sometimes you can tell people driving are looking for parking just by their pace," Coppola said. "Hopefully, we'll take the guesswork out of parking. Just get out curbside, enjoy the city and come back and have their car delivered to them."

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A Web site coming soon, www.newhavenvalet.com, will direct visitors to a map of downtown and its valet zones. Drivers will also be able to print out a coupon good for \$1 off any valet stay of under one hour, or \$2 off a stay of one hour or more, Coppola said.

Criterion Cinemas Manager Joe Masher said he has pushed the city to offer valet zones for

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months. Criterion already validates patron parking for \$3 in the Temple Street Garage, but valet parking would be an added amenity, Masher said.

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"It's a great idea to support the number of restaurants and theaters, given the limited number of spaces on Temple Street," he said. "Valet parking is a great example of how New Haven is on the leading edge of culture."

Shubert Theater Executive Director John Fisher said he is "very excited" about the new valet zones.

"The new valet parking program will be very beneficial to the city of New Haven, and great for Shubert Theater patrons, by providing a service that will make their theater-going experience and overall downtown experience more enjoyable," Fisher said.

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Three firms — Pro Park, LAZ Parking of Hartford and The Event Co. of Woodbridge — submitted proposals, Wessel said. Pro Park was selected because it already runs surface lots downtown and provides valet service to the Omni and the Temple Medical Center.

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