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Sunday Jul 15

Carports could alleviate parking woes

Dealer ready to sell city on stacking system

By Will Oremus / Daily News Staff Writer

Walk up to the gate of your two-story carport, insert your magnetic key in the slot on the outside and press the green button.

Hear the whirring as the cars on the bottom level slide sideways to create an opening for your car. Watch as it descends from the top level, wait for the gate to open, hop in and drive off.

Is this how Peninsula residents will start their commutes in the future?

A Lafayette-based dealer of German-made, semiautomatic "auto lifts" is banking on it. Klaus Car Parking Systems, which has sold dozens of the devices in San Francisco and Berkeley, is working with San Mateo to see if its products can gain traction here on the Peninsula.

"The concept is to compress the parking lot," said Norman Brudigam, the regional dealership's president. "Instead of having cars sprawled all over, you stack them."

That reduces the amount of space developers must devote to parking, and could serve as an alternative to costly and flood-prone underground lots. The question is whether the technology will be embraced by officials and residents in an area that, for all its space constraints, is still largely suburban.

Brudigam recently took San Mateo planners on a tour of parking lifts his company has installed in the East Bay. And last month, plans for the first Klaus parking lift in San Mateo County came before the city's planning commission.

At first glance, the commissioners weren't quite sure what to make of the contraptions.

"I may eventually come around to see this as a great concept," commissioner Robert Gooyer said. "If it's brand-new, I want to get a sense of whether people will really use them or not."

If technophobes or people in a rush shun the lifts and park on the street instead, Gooyer said, the purpose of the technology will have been defeated.

The lifts are being proposed as part of a project to convert 28 apartments on Lago Street into 24 condominiums.

The complex was built in 1965, when San Mateo's off-street parking requirements were less stringent. But the developer has to meet today's heightened parking standards in order to gain approval for the renovation. The lifts would accomplish that by turning six parking spots into 11.

In a June report, the city's planning staff said it sees merit in the lifts but would likely need to develop new policies to regulate them.

Mayor Jack Matthews, an architect by day, called the parking devices "a cool idea." His firm even considered including them in its plans for the proposed 16-unit San Mateo Drive Condominiums, but dropped the idea out of concern for marketability and planning commission approval.

"I do think it's a system whose day will come, because there's way too much expensive property devoted to parking cars," Matthews said. "The era of just having big, open expanses of parking, I think, is coming to an end."

San Franciscans, Matthews added, are happy to use the lifts because they don't take easy parking for granted. "Here we still have a more suburban mindset, where you still expect to park in front of the store you shop at and you still expect to park in front of your house."

Brudigam said he's accustomed to initial skepticism from communities that aren't familiar with the lifts. But he's optimistic they'll catch on here eventually because space is at such a premium.

In Munich, Germany, Brudigam said, various models of Klaus lifts have been in operation for 30 years, and there are now more than 60,000 citywide.

"The Bay Area's about twice the size of Munich," Brudigam said. "So yes, you could say there's a lot of potential for growth."

The planning commission is scheduled to revisit the Lago project on July 24.

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