

Ryan Sweeney takes issue with the fact **TriMet** ticketed one of his employees.

The manager of **Village Inn** restaurant in Tualatin says the establishment has sat peaceably adjacent to the **TriMet** Park & Ride lot at 72nd Avenue and Bridgeport Road since his business relocated in 2005. But during weekends for the past month, Sweeney and his mother, **Village Inn** owner Connie Watt, have taken to driving employees to their cars in an effort to elude a **TriMet** agent who has been enforcing parking code Sweeney finds objectionable. One of his waitresses was issued a \$60 fine for improper use of the lot.

Sweeney says the restaurant will pay it, and that **Village Inn** employees do use the **TriMet** lot for overflow parking, but only during peak times on Saturdays and Sundays — hours when only the 76 bus runs from the transit station, and when the lot remains largely empty, Sweeney says.

But he claims his employees are being targeted, followed to their cars and penalized for wearing **Village Inn** uniforms — clear indicators that they are parking in the lot to go to work, not to commute elsewhere.

“It’s never really been a problem until lately,” he said, adding that he has questioned whether there was a “vendetta” against his business or his staff. “In the last month, there’s a guy out there on Sunday evenings picking off employees as they walk to their cars.”

According to **TriMet**, the Park & Ride has a total of 466 parking spaces north and south of the intersection, and is open every day.

But Sweeney has photographed the parking lot at various times throughout the weekend to demonstrate the lot is, by his estimate, about 95 percent empty on Saturdays and Sundays — days when some of his employees would take the bus to work, were it not for the limited weekend service.

**TriMet** won’t budge. In an email dated Aug. 5, a customer service representative emphasized that Park & Ride lots are for the use of **TriMet** riders.

Sweeney argues that the **TriMet** signage specifies only that the spaces are for “transit/carpool use.”

“The definition of carpool is loose,” Sweeney said. “If two of my employees rode to work together, that would be carpooling, right? Is that the definition of carpool they want to use?”

“Just as restaurants and other businesses have parking lots for their own patrons and employees, **TriMet** provides Park and Ride lots for our bus, MAX and WES customers,” **TriMet** public information officer Roberta Alstadt said. “We do allow registered carpoolers to use our lots, but unfortunately cannot open them up to the public.”

For Sweeney, the issue isn’t one of simple semantics. After paying an average of \$575 a month in **TriMet** payroll taxes, he expects **TriMet** and his business to enjoy a more symbiotic relationship.

Fifty-seven percent of **TriMet**’s operating funding comes from the payroll taxes of businesses located within **TriMet** District boundaries. In 2011, such taxes brought in more than \$226.4 million for the daily operations of the bus and rail lines.

“I understand they want to protect the lot for **TriMet** riders,” he said. “On Saturdays and Sundays, the lot is empty. It’s not even an issue. If we were to follow what **TriMet** were telling us to do, that would take up 10, 15 of our spots, that’s 10 or 15 spots over our morning rush, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. in the afternoon” with a quick turn of tables, he said.

“It’s taking money out of small business’ pocket, just trying to get to work,” he added.

**TriMet** disagrees.

“The Tualatin Park and Ride is not a public lot and is clearly marked for transit use only and therefore should be used as such,” Alstadt said. “We informed Mr. Sweeney of this both in writing and verbally. Despite that notification, Mr. Sweeney continues to direct his employees to park there.”

“The point isn’t following the rules to a T,” Sweeney said. “The point is (enforcement) is excessive, and it’s not necessary because (parking lot use) is not a problem.”

Copyright © 2013 Tigard-Tualatin-Sherwood Times, All rights reserved.