

Montclair church reported cause of parking headache for residents

Residents from Seymour Street and Roosevelt Place have long had issues with people attending events at the Wellmont Theater, citing increased noise as patrons walk back to their cars at night and an overall burden upon the limited parking spaces on their blocks.

photos courtesy of Kimberly santiago

One of the images that Seymour Street resident Kimberly Santiago took during a Sunday Morning near the Wellmont Theater. This car, parked in the buffer zone between a handicapped and permit parking spot, shows just one of several illegally parked cars that residents had claimed belonged to congregants of a weekly church service hosted in the Wellmont.

Yet, for all the late-night rock concerts and dance parties, some residents allege that it's been congregants of a Sunday church service at the venue who have been disregarding the area's parking restrictions and causing a weekly headache for local tenants.

Hillsong's church began 30 years ago in Sydney, Australia, according to Carl Lentz, a pastor of the Montclair chapter. Hillsong NYC followed, with services currently hosted at Irving Plaza. Crossing the Hudson a little more than two years ago, it found another home in the Wellmont Theater.



Lentz said that Hillsong draws 1,000 attendees to its Sunday events in the Wellmont, with some congregants commuting as long as two hours from where they live. Of course not all of them are taking their own cars, but with that many people, there's bound to be a dearth of available parking spaces in the area, and the issue for some who live nearby had been not so much the sheer magnitude of automobiles, but where they were parked.

"Living downtown by the Wellmont, anytime there's a concert, it gets a little hairy. Even with the dinner crowd, you can't find parking, as we all know," said Kimberly Santiago, a resident of Seymour Street. "Everyone deals with it. It's one of the pros and cons of living here. But on Sundays, it's been, for maybe about a year or so, that the guests that come to the Hillsong NYC event, it's not just that there's no parking. They park in areas that are not legal spots."

Santiago noted that she had observed cars blocking driveways and crosswalks, parked on the curb, lining the sides of the South Willow Parking Lot making it difficult for other cars to pass, and in permit-only spaces.

"There's a lot on Plymouth [Street] across from the library where you could park along the wall, along the building there. They park right behind those cars," she said. "It takes you about five minutes to kind of wiggle your car out."

When asked how she could be sure that Hillsong's congregants were the source of the problem, Santiago said she watched people leave the Wellmont after the services and walk back to the offending cars.

Feeling as though the Montclair Police Department and parking enforcement were not taking steps to dissuade the errant parkers, she and several of her neighbors started a petition a month ago.

With signatures spanning two apartment buildings in the area, and following the advice of a fellow resident, Santiago raised the issue with the Township Council.

"I was receiving a number of emails," said 3rd Ward Councilmember Sean Spiller, who then reached out to Township Manager Timothy Stafford and Tina Iordamlis, project administrator for the municipal Parking Utility, seeking a solution that would be agreeable to the church and residents.

Iordamlis, Montclair Police Chief David Sabagh and Sergeant Stephanie Egnazzo appeared at a council meeting on Jan. 19 to brief Spiller's colleagues on what was being done.

Sabagh told The Montclair Times that three weeks ago the MPD initiated a more fastidious observation of the area around the Wellmont, and seeing much of what Santiago had described in her complaints, issued tickets to illegally parked cars.

"It seemed to all be related to that church attending in the Wellmont, because it all occurred on Sundays, or Sunday mornings," Sabagh said. "We've been talking to the people at the Wellmont to make other arrangements so this problem does not continue week after week."

Lentz said that The Montclair Times' inquiry was the first he had heard of the problem, and that the church utilized limited signage to direct its congregants toward parking spaces.

"Probably as people pull off Bloomfield [Avenue] to come in, we probably have just the lot behind the Wellmont where we're allowed to have people park. That'd be it. Very minimal parking signs," the pastor said.

But, with an official Hillsong logo marking a parking lot entrance, one might be given the notion that the lot behind the Wellmont has been reserved solely for Hillsong NYC.

Sabagh said, "I would imagine these signs could give the parishioners a false impression that they have full access to these lots. I certainly think it could be misleading and I'm sure that's one of the issues that our parking division might be dealing with."

Whether or not the Hillsong signage is confusing, a PDF that Santiago shared with the Township Council illustrated what one might consider a gratuitous disregard for common parking regulations in any municipality. One photograph showed a car parked in the blue-lined buffer zone to the left of a handicapped spot. In another, a car was parked in front of a fire hydrant.

Sean Striegle, a representative of Live Nation Entertainment, the Wellmont's parent company, told The Montclair Times that he was unaware of issues relating to the theater regarding parking on Sunday mornings.

"I don't think it's any different from any other event," said Striegle. "With growth there will always be hiccups, and with an increased amount of traffic and an increased amount of people visiting that section of Montclair, there will always be a learning curve. If there are issues regarding parking, or there are issues regarding the amount of people at a certain amount of time, or at a specific date, that is something we will be working on to alleviate, and reach the intended goal of improving everything for the town of Montclair."

Striegle added that parking issues such as this are ultimately in the hands of each vehicle's owner: "It's their responsibility to abide by any posted laws."

This past weekend, the Wellmont Theater had taken an active role in resolving the issue. Santiago said there were theater employees directing drivers, and "no parking" signage in the lots where the problems had previously existed.

"So far, so good. They were not parking on curbs, they weren't blocking any driveways," noted Santiago. "It was promising."

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