

## The Role Of Parking

According to the urbanist Neil Peirce, “no great city has ever protected parking as a fundamental right.” This observation is true, but how does a car-dependent city become great without alienating its drivers? The first step is to make driving less necessary by creating a physical environment that rewards walking. As a city introduces a better balance of uses and more walkable streets, people begin to need their cars less. But it is the fate of every busy urban environment to have a parking “problem”; like roadway capacity, parking capacity generates an unmet latent demand that new capacity can rarely satisfy. For this reason, parking policy should reflect the fact that a parking problem is a good problem to have.

One of the reasons that parking demand is so high is that most people who use it do not pay its full cost. This is clearly the case in Lowell, which has some of the least expensive structured parking in the U.S., with no users paying more than \$64 per month, and many paying less. While it would be a mistake to dramatically raise the cost of parking immediately, the City must operate with an awareness that parking pricing is the key tool that it has at its disposal to encourage the sort of parking and driving behaviors that would best benefit the downtown. Parking fees should not be looked to as a revenue generator, but neither should artificially low pricing be allowed to introduce dysfunction into the free market of supply and demand. This is particularly relevant as the City moves towards building an extensive streetcar system, whose ridership will be undermined by the current artificially subsidized parking rates.

## On-Street Parking Strategy

In the meantime, until a competitive alternative to driving is available, the City should use its parking rates to make parking more convenient, not less. While low parking rates may seem like a gift to residents, workers, and businesses, they can instead do grave damage to a downtown by encouraging overuse that makes parking unavailable to those willing to pay more for it—those with money to spend. Overuse also causes people to circle in search of a space, which, in addition to being especially frustrating in Lowell’s one-way system, causes unnecessary congestion during business hours.

This phenomenon is thoroughly discussed in the leading best-practices manual, *The High Cost of Free Parking*, by Donald Shoup. As has been effectively applied to electricity and other utilities, Mr. Shoup



*Lowell’s investment in on-street parking kiosks allow it to manage parking rates more comprehensively than is currently the practice.*

recommends that a congestion-pricing scheme be used to ensure continuous availability of a limited amount of on-street parking, typically one space per block face, or 15%. Under such a regime, more valuable parking spaces become more costly, wealthy shoppers can always find a place to stop, and circling is largely eliminated. Spaces on street become more expensive than spaces in garages, which encourages better use of the garage investment. Parking revenues rise, and shops prosper. Such strategies are being used to good effect in Pasadena, CA, and elsewhere.

The city is fortunate in that its Parking Department, under the leadership of a former high-tech CEO, has already made the wise investment in on-street parking kiosks. These sophisticated machines, in addition to all their other benefits—like allowing remote meter feeding—also make it easy and inexpensive to adjust pricing, even around the clock. That said, after a brief period of experimentation, it should be fairly easy to settle on a set parking price regime that can be readily communicated and not subject to ongoing change.

It is strongly recommend that the city actively pursue a right-pricing strategy for parking in its retail areas. Until such a system is in place however, two small and important changes, instituted right away, would begin to accomplish some of the same objectives: First, on-street parking should be made slightly more expensive per hour than parking in nearby structures, so that long-term parkers are encouraged to keep the curbs free. Currently, the opposite regime is in place, to the detriment of downtown shopping.

Second, on-street parking in retail areas should not be free between 6 PM and midnight, as it is currently. In addition to discouraging garage use, this regime

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encourages local residents to fill spaces in front of businesses, such that restaurant and boutique patrons are unable to park nearby. These patrons would much rather pay for parking than have to park remotely, and residents are currently incentivized to inconvenience them.

As long as nearby garage parking remains affordable, the City has every incentive to organize its on-street parking on free-market principles. Conveniently, that approach happens to generate greater parking revenue, but that is not the goal.

Finally, both driving and parking on Merrimack Street are hampered by the current size and placement of delivery, service, and drop-off zones. These zones have been distributed based not on any comprehensive plan, but on a piecemeal sequence of individual requests. As a result, some no-parking zones are larger than necessary, and some businesses lack service areas, resulting in mid-day double-parking traffic jams. While it will be opposed by certain individual businesses, a comprehensive curbside plan for Merrimack Street would benefit the collective whole.

## Structured Parking Strategy

It is hard to say how downtown Lowell would have developed over the past three decades without the massive investment that was made in its municipal parking decks. While some would argue that this money would have been better spent on a streetcar, there is no doubt that these parking structures have helped to make Lowell's resurgence possible. But parking decks are extremely expensive and, with the exception of the Hamilton Canal District, the City has no plans to build any other decks soon. This strategy is

wise in the context of the goal of becoming a more walkable, less automobile-dependent city, for reasons already discussed.

The good news is that, contrary to perceptions, the City's five municipal parking structures still hold significant unused capacity. All of them are mostly empty at night, and many of them still contain empty spaces during business hours: cumulatively, the lots peak at under 70% occupancy on a typical day. These empty spaces are literally money in the bank, which the City can use to float new development, fully making good on its initial parking investment.

Another factor working to the City's advantage is the relative proximity of the five downtown lots to each other, and the willingness among the lowest-rate payers—students—to be moved from garage to garage as needs dictate. Given these circumstances, the City Parking Administrator is able to play a strategic game of parking lot chess, generating capacity in garages where new development demands it.

Taking advantage of available parking essentially means two things:

First, the huge nighttime vacancies suggest that additional residential development can locate anywhere nearby an existing lot without requiring any new parking provision. This circumstance dramatically reduces the cost of new housing. The City is to be congratulated on its current parking regulation, which requires only one parking space per unit, and allows that space to be located in an existing garage within 1500' of the residence. That requirement is currently less conservative than most developers would have it, so it does no harm. Over time, however, the

City would be wise to eliminate this requirement entirely, as the development community will always demand more parking as a whole than is necessary. And eventually, the City may wish to replace its parking minimums with parking maximums, to encourage residents to take advantage of its investment in a streetcar.

Second, the identification of sites for future office development will be heavily dependent on the current location of unused daytime capacity, in conjunction with the City Parking Administrator's ability to shift demand strategically. This technique is particularly relevant to the specific short-term interventions discussed in Chapter 9.



*The Downes Garage, one of the City's busiest, still experiences the large nighttime vacancies typical of the entire system.*

Longer term, the capacity of the lots can be increased further by applying a congestion-pricing regime to them as well. With the construction of a streetcar and its provision of a viable alternative to driving, the relative cost of parking vs. transit will be a key factor in people's choice of transportation mode. At that time, the cost of parking should be gradually increased during times of crowding, to the point where each lot always contains a small number of unused spaces. As with on-street parking, only then will the free market be allowed to operate.

## Parking Design

There is perhaps no greater deterrent to pedestrian life than an exposed parking lot or structure. Surface parking lots should be hidden from walkable streets by occupied buildings, even if these buildings are extremely thin. When no other solution is available for a surface parking lot, an attractive landscaped wall or hedge, approximately 4' to 5' tall, should be built at the lot edge. While this can be considered a second-rate solution, many surface lots in Lowell would benefit from such an intervention.

Multi-story parking structures should contain occupied space at street level. Many cities now insist that all new parking structures include ground-floor retail space, but upper stories are also ideally hidden behind habitable space—20'-deep apartments are best. At the very least, parking structure facades should be detailed to resemble an occupied building, which is much easier when sloped ramps are restricted to the center of the structure so that its street edges remain flat.

Good and bad examples of parking lot edges can be found throughout the downtown. The Early Ga-



*The Early Garage properly meets the sidewalk with storefronts at street level.*

rage, with its first floor of commercial use, shows an encouraging evolution beyond the Roy Garage, which in turn provides a better building-like façade than the other three City structures. The new private garage on Perkins and Hall Streets unfortunately places unattractive car ramps directly against two sidewalks, where an inexpensive stick-built 20' liner of apartments would have created a far superior outcome, and perhaps a greater profit for the developer. The current City zoning code, while exemplary in most respects, should be modified to ensure a better performance from private garages built in designated walkable areas.

