

Livable Places Update

Emerging Trends in Community Planning and Design

July 2012

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Where Do We Park the Cars? — Experts Suggest Some Strategies: Providing places to park our cars can be very expensive, and it's a cost that somebody has to pay. Often the costs are hidden in the price of rent, food, clothing, and other amenities.

Recently many planners have decided that parking requirements that exceed the actual need are an inefficient use of precious financial resources. Smart public policy requires enough parking, but not too much.

The June issue of the LPU featured stories from cities that believed they had too few parking spaces only to discover that this was not the case. However, even in these communities, visitors continue to complain about a lack of parking. To further explore this vexing situation, the LGC organized a dinner forum bringing together three parking experts and 22 local elected officials from big and little cities around San Francisco's South Bay.

Our experts included a city planner, Redwood City's Dan Zack; Councilmember Ann Cheng from El Cerrito who works for TransForm (a nonprofit addressing transportation needs), and a parking consultant, Brian Canepa with Nelson/Nygaard. Some interesting insights and ideas emerged!

The experts advised our elected officials to begin by identifying the problem they want to solve. Are people complaining about a lack of parking? What do the parking surveys show? Is there really a need for additional places to park a car?

Perhaps the biggest concern is traffic congestion? Or is the larger concern that parking problems and/or traffic congestion are causing local businesses to lose customers? Are residents complaining about traffic spillover from commercial districts into residential neighborhoods?

Once the problem is clearly identified, then it's time to get creative. Bruce Liedstrand, former City Manager of Redwood City, discovered that their new downtown plan was not going to pencil out because of the cost of the parking. Thus, he instructed his creative planner, Dan Zack, to come up with a solution. Dan did and today downtown Redwood City is thriving.

The following are basic concepts that floated to the surface during the forum:

One Size Doesn't Fit All: Standardized parking requirements are inappropriate — there is no magic number. Parking needs depend upon densities, transit access, income, household sizing, pricing, the ages of residents or users, and more. The City of Sacramento's draft parking plan approaches this by dividing the study area into a grid of parking zones and developing parking requirements to fit each situation.

Because downtown Redwood City has transit access and is walkable, the City reduced residential parking ratios in the district to .75 for studios, 1:1 for one bedroom units, and 1:1.5 for units that offer two bedrooms or more. The reduction in parking requirements allowed developers' downtown housing proposals to pencil out. It was estimated by consultant Brian Canepa that for each parking space required for a residential unit, the price of the unit increases 15 to 30 percent!

Some cities offer an in lieu fee to the developer enabling him/her to eliminate or reduce the parking spaces they must provide. In Santa Monica, developers pay \$25,000 to \$30,000 for the privilege. This money has been spent to build city-owned structured parking that is shared by multiple users. Because Redwood City wants to encourage more development in their downtown, they have been offering developers a bargain rate in lieu fee of \$10,000 per parking space.

Responding to Complaints About a Lack of Parking: Commonly, when people complain that there is nowhere to park, it means that they can't park in front of or very near to the store or restaurant of their choosing. Survey after survey shows that a lot of cities have more than enough spaces to park a car — but the spaces are not on the street or near the popular destinations.

In Redwood City, this problem has been addressed by charging higher rates for close-in parking meters and offering much lower rates for more distant spaces on the street or in parking garages. In Ventura, as well as Redwood City, the staff use Smart Meters to allow them to adjust the price of on-street parking spaces as needed. When there is plenty of space available, the cost per minute goes down. This system requires Wi-Fi — thus Ventura advertizes free Wi-Fi service as a special downtown benefit.



Pedestrians are good for business!
A downtown Philadelphia street

To further reduce complaints about the high cost of on-street parking, the City of Pasadena puts labels on their parking meters stating that parking fees are spent in the neighborhood on benches, flowers, and other amenities. Initially, they say, busi-

nesses bought into the idea of paid parking knowing that the proceeds would be spent making the neighborhood a more appealing place for visitors.

Redwood City staff advises that it's best not to ticket as soon as a meter expires. They allow a ten-minute leeway to reduce the number of angry constituents who are paying a premium to park on the street.

Making Use of Parking Garages: Providing more parking garages has not, in itself, proven to solve complaints about a lack of parking. The question was why? It was observed that at a mall, shoppers will walk long distances across an unappealing parking lot, but their destination is in view. This is not the case with structured parking. Attractive, creative signage can help make it clear that a parking space is convenient to the driver's destination.

Many communities have done a great job of hiding structured parking with designs that beautifully meld into the architecture of the town. While design regulations were highly recommended by our experts, attractive signage is also critical to helping unfamiliar visitors be aware that parking is available behind that beautiful building façade!

Fear for one's safety is often a valid concern about parking in a garage, particularly during hours when few users are present. Redwood City makes use of "mobility ambassadors" at night, to assure the security of the users. Garages are built with high ceilings and are well lit. Glass stairwells also help reduce the fear factor by making it clear that no one is hiding around the corner.

Finally, it was noted that to increase the desirability of parking in a garage, cities can charge reduced rates and allow generous parking times while placing short time limits for coveted spaces on the street.

Addressing Traffic Congestion: According to consultant Brian Canepa, about 30% of traffic in downtowns is caused by people circling the block looking for a place to park. More often than not, the problem is not a lack of parking; it's a lack of parking on the street, very near where residents want to go. Some cities have had success placing strict time limits on the most desirable spaces. Others make parking in the most popular areas the most expensive option.

While limited street parking may be of concern to a single business, on the whole it can be the water that floats all boats. The trick is to create an attractive walk from the parking garage to an individual destination as a way of encouraging more people to pass by and become familiar with nearby shops and restaurants.

Parking Spillover: There is always a danger of restrictive parking sending traffic into existing neighborhoods. One way to handle this is to restrict parking in these vulnerable residential areas during times of peak use. The City of Davis prevents University students from parking in front of homes by making it illegal to park in these spaces

during school hours. Parking on nights and weekends is not restricted.

Parking spillover into neighborhoods can also be managed with residential parking districts where residents get a limited number of parking passes for their visitors or parking benefit districts in which there are a limited number of visitor permits available for purchase and residents as a group decide how to spend the revenue.

Encouraging Shared Parking: There may be many places where private parking lots can be shared with a complementary use. A church parking lot might be shared with a store that is closed on Sundays or an office parking lot might be shared with a theater.

Redwood City's Dan Zack told us that initially there was resistance to this idea. However, he overcame the resistance by explaining the financial benefits to all of sharing the use of valuable parking resources. To address liability concerns, the city indemnified private lot owners against vandalism that might occur when sharing their lot during off-hours.

Avoiding the Need to Park By Reducing Auto Use: The City of Santa Monica now requires anyone building in their downtown to demonstrate how their project will avoid any new net trips.

Meanwhile, in the San Francisco Bay Area, El Cerrito Councilmember Ann Cheng helps developers reduce the need for expensive parking, using a certification program called GreenTRIP - similar to a LEED awards program for infill development.

Cheng's program carefully examines the proposed building site and its accessibility to transit, walkability and mix of uses. She counts under-utilized existing parking spaces in the area, forecasts the needs of the potential users (young people and seniors may not even own a car), then calculates how a developer can right-size the parking and do as much as possible to help shift occupants away from the car.

To help building residents avoid the need for a car, developers can provide a free transit pass to building occupants, provide access to a car-share program, provide for bike storage, and/or un-bundle a parking space from the cost of a rental apartment. (Occupants can choose to rent a parking space separately should they still want one.)

With the money saved by reducing or eliminating the cost of supplying a parking space, developers may choose to reduce rents or devote the \$35,000 to \$45,000 per unit (the cost of parking in the San Francisco Bay Area) by offering an exercise facility or other community amenity.

Developers whose projects are certified by Cheng's program receive a support letter and testimony in support of their project. GreenTRIP certification has been available for about a year, has granted certification to one project in San Jose, and has eight more in progress. For more information, visit transformca.org/GreenTRIP.