

By Samantha Pearson, Healthy Communities Program Manager, PA Downtown Center

## Parking for Paradise, This Way!



With everyone looking for an app that will transform how municipalities manage and interact with parking, the biggest new concept in parking is also the oldest: walking. And, the second biggest is: pricing.

To hack parking issues, boroughs don't need a hyper loop or other space-aged technology; they need to change how people think about their borough destinations.

The following are attitude adjustments to introduce to the discussion:

1. Parking might be anywhere within a mile of a destination, so park, get out, and walk.
2. If the bike and pedestrian infrastructure is safe, accessible, and pleasant, it becomes part of downtown amenities; people will come for the stroll as well as the show and the meal.
3. All those walks turn out to be better for individual health, community finances, and global climate, so arrival at a destination should be the opportunity to ramble.

## Changing Minds, Rules

There are some actual innovations involved in changing attitudes toward parking, including:

- Adjusting the zoning code to eliminate parking minimums;
- Incentivizing a move away from surface lots to focus on (properly priced) on-street parking, and
- Putting parking maximums into place.

As borough officials start to address these ideas, they may also want to look into unbundling, i.e., separating the provision of parking from the provision of housing, so that new occupants can decide how much parking they need and are willing to pay for. At the same time, they can look at bundling, i.e. having shared claim to offsite parking among multiple businesses.



To help sweeten the deal, municipalities can consider applying parking revenue to public space improvements in the central business district or downtown.

Every borough is unique and will not be in a position to apply every one of these concepts. Arguably, all could afford to start with encouraging and celebrating having more people stow their cars and then join the life of the town playing out daily on the sidewalks

## Stop Paving?

For too long municipal officials have missed the memo about not paving over central business districts to put up parking lots.

Places with the most enduring draw, like Paris or Sevilla, Spain, welcome large numbers of people but almost no cars. Successful attractions that do have lots of cars tend not to be where the action is. For example, at Disney World, the extensive parking is "remote" from the park.

The same could be said for traditional shopping malls. When an overlay of a downtown is placed over the mall, often the distance from shops to parking is the same for both.

As a thought experiment, officials should consider what would happen if a place like Paris or Sevilla took a typical maximalist parking strategy and tried to accommodate cars for everyone. These tourist destinations would cease to be places anyone would want to go.

Crowds of people enjoying a place are part of the conviviality and the appeal; crowds of cars are just traffic.

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## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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### Parking Innovation

All of this is not to say there is no space for technological innovation.

There are apps to help with parking management, some of which are consumer-oriented, allowing people to locate and reserve garage or municipal spaces. Others are civic-scaled, providing messaging either in push alerts, online posts, or on signs, to cut down on vehicles circling looking for a space.

Often these systems require a scale of capital and scope of renovation that might be out of reach. Even shifting from meters to kiosk parking can be beyond the capacity of many boroughs.

For municipalities not in a position to install new equipment that can collect details about typical utilization, counts can be done the old-fashioned way and that data used to adjust parking pricing to get the desired results, which, in most cases, is at least one space available on each block.

If there really are “never any spaces free,” that’s a sign that those spaces don’t cost enough. On the other hand, for spaces no one appears to be using, the cost of these spaces may need to be reduced.

When it comes to innovations another low-tech option is turning all angle-parked vehicles around. This is called back-in angle parking.

Ten years ago it was new and unfamiliar, but residents and visitors will have encountered it in any number of locations. It is a great option for communities where drivers are already well-versed in parallel parking, especially if there are also a lot of people on bikes sharing the streets.

As with parallel parking, a driver in the travel lane decides to park, signals, and uses the right of way to pause the traffic following them while they back in. What this

means on the ground is that the painted lines are angled in the opposite direction.

In practice, as car doors are opened, passengers and drivers are directed more naturally back towards the sidewalk. Also, the noses of vehicles, which are generally lower than the backs, are facing the street.

Then, when it’s time to pull out, because the driver is road forward and the vehicles’ hoods are flanking them, it’s easier to see clearly and pull smoothly out in the direction of travel, rather than trying to back out at cross purposes to the travel lane’s flow.

On the other hand, some boroughs may have plenty of on-street parking available just a block or two from the core business district. In that case, officials may just need to promote it.

Or perhaps, there are conflicts between residents looking for spaces and visitors. In that case, it might be time to consider resident parking permits and/or remind people that they should use the off-street spaces they already have.

To learn more about parking best practices, check out the work of Jeff Speck, author of *Walkable City Rules*, and Don Shoup, author of *The High Cost of Free Parking*.

With parking located and priced right, residents and visitors will fill downtown sidewalks. **B**



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As the Healthy Communities Program Manager, Samantha Pearson works with the PA WalkWorks program, promoting active transportation in core communities. She previously worked in architecture and urban planning in various parts of the U.S. From

2013 to mid-2021 she was the Elm Street Manager in Lewisburg Borough, Union County. Pearson has been part of the new Middle Susquehanna Active Transportation Committee, and helped the PA State Association of Boroughs bring hands-on, full-day Complete Streets workshops to communities around the state.