Essential Information For Downtown Revitalization
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Perspectives

Principles of smart downtown parking

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Downtowns large and small require a special approach to the provision of parking because of their distinctive mixes of land uses, densities, and place-making amenities not found in other locations. By integrating a number of divergent best practices from around the country, I have developed an approach that I have labeled Smart Downtown Parking.

What is Smart Downtown Parking? It strives to serve the increasing demands for adequate parking supply while at the same time recognizing that parking should not damage the key hallmarks of a healthy downtown, namely high density, a pedestrian-friendly environment, and a strong sense of place. And it works to balance the importance of parking to a healthy downtown economy with the needs of pedestrians, keeping in mind that all drivers become pedestrians once they arrive downtown.

Seven core principles underscore the essence of Smart Downtown Parking (SDP).

Principle 1: Understand the proper role of parking in downtowns. Too often, downtown planners and businesspeople put too much emphasis on parking, by elevating its importance over the functions that actually attract people downtown in the first place. Nobody decides to go downtown because there are ample places to park. They come downtown to work, to shop, to take in entertainment, and all the other activities that constitute a downtown.

SDP understands that if parking is oversupplied, badly designed, and/or poorly located, it can potentially decrease the demand for downtown activities by diminishing the collective sense of place — a setting that is compact, walkable, and interesting — that makes the downtown a desirable destination. Parking is a tool and subservient to the main functions of a downtown.

Principle 2: Strategically locate parking facilities. Where you put parking is a key ingredient. To maintain high densities and promote a pedestrian-friendly downtown, SDP advocates avoiding several types of common locations for parking structures and lots:

- Directly on major downtown commercial streets.
- On any downtown corridor with heavy pedestrian volume.
- In the middle of clusters of core functions (i.e., storefronts).
- Near peak land value intersections.

Smarter locations include secondary streets with less pedestrian volume, behind the main street buildings (especially applicable in smaller city downtowns), and on the edges of downtown. Going along with that, you have to clearly mark parking so people can find it, through good directional signage or a wayfinding system. Larger cities may also require a shuttle bus system to get people from their cars parked on the edge of downtown to the core. You can do a lot of damage by putting parking in the wrong location.

Principle 3: Value the utility of on-street parking. On-street parking is valuable both for the driver and for the pedestrian, and so SDP promotes maintaining it as much as possible. Many drivers prefer on-street parallel and angled parking because of its perceived advantages in visibility, accessibility, and heightened sense of personal safety. What's often overlooked is that on-street parking is also very good for pedestrians, because it provides a buffer between moving traffic and the sidewalk, which can make people feel safer.

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Principle 4: Emphasize quality design. Nowhere is it written that parking lots and structures must look utilitarian and stark. Sensitive design standards for exteriors should be adopted to ensure that parking facilities — just like any new building — integrate smoothly with the surrounding downtown fabric. Blank walls should not be allowed anywhere downtown as they serve to kill any semblance of street vitality that may exist. Street-level shops in parking structures not only help to fight the blank wall syndrome, but have proven to add revenue for the facility as well. Parking lots should be generously landscaped along their edges to act as a visual buffer to the passing sidewalk; moreover, lots should include landscaping and other amenities to make the initial transition from driver to pedestrian a positive experience.

Principle 5: Make better use of existing spaces. Downtowns that study use of their parking tend to find that even during the perceived busiest times, there is parking available, but people may not know where it is. SDP recommends using these unoccupied spaces more effectively before thinking of adding more parking. A key is making the public more aware of the whereabouts of these unused spaces. Directional signs and electronic message boards are two means of achieving this awareness campaign, as is publicizing parking locations on websites, brochures, and newspaper advertisements, and through individual downtown businesses communicating directly with their employees and customers.

Shared parking, where multiple users that experience peak parking demand at different times (i.e., government offices or a bank and an entertainment district), can make use of the same facilities, thereby avoiding wasteful duplication.

Principle 6: Control the total volume of downtown parking spaces. Most cities apply traditional minimum off-street parking requirements to their downtown that usually are overstated and based on ubiquitous suburban parking generation rates. One consequence is increased parking coverage rates (PCR) — the ratio of parking area (spaces) to total downtown area. Downtowns with high PCRs (e.g., 81 percent in downtown Los Angeles compared to 31 percent in San Francisco) reduce density levels, spread out downtown destinations beyond walking distance, and, where many buildings have self-contained parking, discourage users from walking on the sidewalks and passing by other downtown businesses. One way to control the supply of parking is to establish parking maximums, rather than minimums, for new downtown development. Providing too much parking discourages people from walking.

Principle 7: Plan for parking comprehensively. Never plan for downtown parking in a vacuum. SDP strongly advocates that parking be planned very carefully within its unique downtown context, factoring in its contribution to and impact upon traffic patterns and flow, the pedestrian experience, density levels, parking coverage rates, activity patterns, aesthetic and historical qualities, and sense of place. Only then can parking effectively serve as a tool for sustaining a healthy downtown.

The goals that downtowns have — to have high density, to be compact and pedestrian friendly, to have a strong sense of place, to take advantage of historic and cultural features — all these things need to be supported by the planning for parking. There should be a comprehensive plan for the downtown, where parking is one of the key ingredients.

Kent Robertson, Professor of Community Development at St. Cloud State University (Minnesota), has published 30 articles on downtown development and has led downtown workshops for communities and at conferences nationwide. For more on this subject, contact the author (at kent@stcloudstate.edu) for a copy of the article "Smart Downtown Parking: Core Principles to Support Downtown Development," which appeared in the April 2005 issue of Parking *magazine.* ◆

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