

# No Such Thing As Free Parking

by Hannah Twaddell

There's no question that Americans are utterly dependent upon cars. With 771 cars for every 1,000 people, gasoline consumption accounts for half of our country's oil demand. We make 87 percent of all our trips by automobile, and less than two percent by public transit.<sup>1</sup> Every year, we drive longer and longer distances, and waste millions of hours sitting in traffic congestion.

But if you ever get to your destination in America, you can be assured there will be plenty of parking. And ninety-nine percent of the time, it will be free. That's a good thing, because every one of our cars spends about ninety-five percent of its life sitting in a parking space.<sup>2</sup>

Imagine if you paid cold, hard cash for the full cost of every minute your car takes up space while you're at work, out shopping, and on a neighborhood street. Sure, it makes sense to pay for the electricity, gas, and food we consume, but paying to use the land we consume for parking? Whoa!

Surprise, says transportation expert Donald Shoup, you already do. And so does everyone else in America, whether or not they even own a car.

In *The High Cost of Free Parking*, Shoup (who teaches planning at UCLA) shows how the costs of "free" parking secretly work their way into every single dollar we circulate, from employee payrolls, to grocery bills, and even to mortgage payments. In his 750-page, meticulously researched book, Shoup argues that our unspoken national pact to provide plentiful free parking in every city is playing a key role in:

- the rapid spread of low-density, single-

use development;

- the slow death of public transit;
- the lack of affordable housing; and
- the decline of many central business districts.

In addition, the acres of asphalt devoted to parking have created environmental headaches ranging from oily toxins that slide into the water supply to increased heat generated by the large paved surfaces.

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America's road to parking lot hell was paved with the best of intentions. With assembly-line cars rolling over the last of the on-street hitching posts in the 1930s, a few progressive city fathers laid down the law: every development had to provide off-street parking. The idea caught on. Today, ample off-site parking is required for virtually every development in every community. These requirements, says Shoup, have resulted in far more parking space than we need. This, in turn, has spurred our ever-increasing use of the automobile.

Because the full cost of using land for parking (which takes up more space than any other use in some cities) is bundled into everything from restaurant meals to local taxes, we've had little understanding of parking's actual price tag – and little incentive to plan it more efficiently. We rarely hesitate to drive even very short distances, knowing there's "free" parking at our destination.

We also didn't know that requiring so much parking would take up so much land. It is literally driving us all apart.

Most zoning ordinances require various land uses to provide the same amount of parking spaces per 1,000 square feet, regardless of factors which can reduce the need, like location near transit. These "golden rules," such as four parking spaces for every 1,000 square feet of office space and five for every 1,000 square feet of retail space, are applied almost everywhere.

And here's a secret: few of us know whether these ratios are actually appropriate for our community. Planners have generally turned to one of two sources: (1) parking generation rates published by the Institute for Transportation Engineers (ITE), or (2) another community's requirement (often based on the ITE manual).

Since the 1950's, ITE's *Parking Generation* manual has been premised on identifying the maximum possible need for parking in a given site, consistent with standard planning policy. As ITE itself acknowledges, "historically the parking generation data has been dominated by isolated, suburban sites."<sup>3</sup> While the manual properly cites the limitations of the data, few planners are versed enough in the technical nuances of survey analysis to make much use of cautionary notes. Most of us look for the average peak rate and round up.

Unfortunately, our cumulative decisions to err on the side of too much rather than too little have resulted in unnecessarily huge parking lots. For example, a private sector study cited by Shoup determined that a Home Depot lot with 316 spaces would allow customers

<sup>3</sup> ITE also notes that as it updates its current *Parking Generation* manual, "we are encouraging the submission of data for sites with a variety of characteristics (active TDM, heavy transit use, downtown, shared parking, mixed-use, bicycle parking, sites with parking cost, as well as isolated, free-standing single-use sites)." Quoted from ITE web site: <[www.ite.org/parkgen/datacollection.asp](http://www.ite.org/parkgen/datacollection.asp)>.

<sup>1</sup> See Bureau of Transportation Statistics "Highlights of the 2001 National Household Travel Survey," Table A-10. Report available online at: <[www.bts.gov](http://www.bts.gov)>.

<sup>2</sup> From Donald Shoup, *The High Cost of Free Parking* (American Planning Association, 2005), p. 16.


to find parking easily almost all of the year. By comparison, a typical zoning code might require as many as 639 spaces, more than double the actual need for all but the busiest five hours per year. Just think of all the things you could do with the half of the Home Depot parking lot the store doesn't need.

Donald Shoup offers several cogent and useful proposals to begin reversing the trend toward too many parking spaces:

- *Charge fair-market prices for on-street parking in core commercial areas.* At the very least, street spaces should be metered and cost motorists no less than garage spaces. Curb spaces will still be more desirable if they're more convenient than other options, but it's certainly not uncommon for Americans to pay more for convenience.

Interestingly, Shoup points out that metering street spaces in this way has a major fringe benefit: reducing congestion. He notes that in some cities up to thirty percent of daily traffic congestion can be attributed to people "cruising" for free on-street spaces. More than one of every four drivers are circling the block looking for a curb space rather than paying to use a garage. People make a living in New York as "car shepherds" because downtown professionals would rather pay someone to move their car every two hours than pay for garage space.

- *Spend your community's money on quality of life, rather than quantity of parking.* Use the monies generated by municipal parking meters to invest in downtown and neighborhood improvement projects. Not only will this make a proposal to charge for on-street parking much more politically feasible, but it will help establish a reliable revenue stream for important public investments.

 **Parking Benefit Districts.**

- *Reduce or eliminate off-street parking requirements.* Shoup argues that developers and communities waste millions of dollars constructing excess, rarely used, parking spaces. The key is to modify a zoning code's off-street parking requirements to avoid this result. This can entail strategies such as: encouraging shared use of parking lots; giving developers a choice to pay cash fees "in lieu" of building excess spaces; instituting "parking maximums" (setting maximum allowable parking rates for different types of land uses); and adjusting parking requirements to account for factors such as the availability of transit and walking options in a given area.<sup>4</sup>

- *Direct the location and design of parking lots to support a vibrant street life.* Many communities are developing design standards calling for parking to be located behind buildings so that the front doors open directly on the street. This one simple shift can make an enormous difference in an area's attractiveness and vitality. No one wants to walk past parking lots, but everyone likes to window shop.

Similarly, parking garages can be designed to fit into the urban fabric and use the land efficiently. Sometimes this is done by incorporating ground-floor



*Parking garages can be designed to blend into our downtowns, as with this garage in Burlington, Vermont.*

retail and office space into garages, and by using architectural elements to break up long blank walls that make pedestrians feel uncomfortable.

- *Get over the notion that people won't go downtown if parking spaces aren't as cheap, abundant, or convenient as in suburban shopping centers.* People go downtown because it offers a vibrant mix of activities in close proximity to one another. Parking lots destroy the proximity, dilute the mix, and waste valuable land that could be used for housing, shops, or parks. As economist Richard Voith points out: "Plentiful, low-cost parking may be at odds with the very aspect that makes a downtown area unique – high density."<sup>5</sup>

It's time to stem the tidal wave of parking that is flooding our landscape and drowning our businesses. We can make it happen by treating parking as an economic commodity instead of a God-given right, and by applying good design standards to urban and suburban development. ♦

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Voith, "The Downtown Parking Syndrome: Does Curing the Illness Kill the Patient," *Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia Business Review*, Jan-Feb 1998. *Editor's Note:* For more on the oversupply of downtown parking and its negative impacts, see Roberta Brandes Gratz's "We Don't Have Enough Parking," in *PCJ #48* (available to order & download at: [www.plannersweb.com/wfiles/w221.html](http://www.plannersweb.com/wfiles/w221.html)).

<sup>4</sup> Another interesting strategy pointed out by *PCJ* Editorial Board member Larry Frey (Director of Development for Bradenton, Florida) is "banked" parking. As Frey explains, "we allow developers to provide 'banked parking' which is landscaped or green until they find they might actually need it ... which usually does not happen." In other words, set aside the space for future parking, but don't build it unless it's actually needed.



## **Parking Benefit Districts**

One solution applauded by Donald Shoup is the establishment of "parking benefit districts" in downtown cores. Within these districts, funds collected from on-street parking meters are poured directly into improvements that make the city more attractive. For example, Shoup highlights how Pasadena, California (since 1993) has used parking meter funds as part of its efforts to revitalize the historic "Old Pasadena" area. These funds have helped finance parking garages, as well as amenities such as sidewalks and street lighting.