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Parking Pays for Itself in Downtown Ann Arbor

By Tom Brown and David Fields, AICP

Ann Arbor, home of the University of Michigan, benefits from both big city and small town attributes, including a compact downtown, vibrant public spaces, and the ability to get around town on foot, bike, or bus. So it's not surprising that this city of 114,000 has attracted increasing residential interest from outside its traditional, university-centered populations — particularly among empty nesters looking for a pleasing retirement community.

Rather than growing ever farther outward, Ann Arbor has decided to focus new housing in its downtown. In 2005, the city convened a Downtown Residential Task Force to identify barriers to residential development. The group subsequently commissioned Calthorpe Associates, the California-based urban design and planning firm, to frame a set of development strategies, including a comprehensive parking strategy. (The strategies are part of the firm's Recommended Vision & Policy Framework for Downtown Ann Arbor.)

Downtown parking has been at the center of some of the city's most intransigent town-gown conflicts, going back to student anti-car attitudes of the 1960s. In the mid-'70s, when the student vote gained power in local elections, funding for downtown parking facilities was severely cut, over the protests of business owners.

After years of neglect, the city in 1992 turned over control of its seven parking structures to the newly created Downtown Development Authority. The DDA, a quasi-public agency, agreed to finance a \$40 million garage repair and replacement program, using funds from a tax increment financing district.

Since then, the agency has managed not only to revitalize the garages, but also to get an innovative parking plan adopted and to enact some progressive transportation demand management programs. They include a universal transit pass (participating employers pay \$5 for annual, unlimited-ride bus passes for their employees); a fare-free circulator bus service between the university and downtown; and the getDowntown program, which promotes multimodal commuting to downtown jobs.

Parking practices

The DDA's core philosophy is that parking should pay for itself. This approach is at the heart of the city's current parking management practices, which include:

- No minimum requirements. There are no parking requirements for as-of-right development within the downtown (similar to changes made recently in downtown districts in San Francisco and Portland).
- Shared parking. Nearly all downtown trip generators rely on a consolidated inventory of shared public parking (similar to recently adopted practices in several California cities and in Montgomery County, Maryland, parking districts).
- Public control. All public off-street parking facilities are publicly controlled either by the DDA or the university.

Steps to a plan

The debate over parking in Ann Arbor revolves around the question of quantity: What is the right amount of parking for downtown? The business community generally claims that parking is inadequate to support economic development. A large contingent of mostly downtown and near-downtown residents counters that there is too much parking, and that it undermines alternative modes and urban design ideals.

Unlike the past, today's university students seem to be on the "more parking" side. They're as likely to ship their SUVs from their East Coast homes for the semester as to petition for more downtown bike lanes.

So it's all the more surprising that the DDA was able to get its parking plan adopted.

The effort started in September 2006, when the DDA, with support from Nelson\Nygaard Consulting Associates, initiated inventory and occupancy surveys for all parking controlled by the agency, including all metered on-street spaces within the downtown. Questionnaires concerning parking experiences and perceptions, as well as modal patterns and preferences, were placed on the windshields of cars parked on- and off-street. In addition, parkers were interviewed at various locations.

In all, nearly 400 completed surveys were returned and more than 20 interviews were conducted. That was followed by a series of focus groups, workshops, and public open houses.

In March 2007, the project team kicked off a week of outreach meetings, focusing on policy options and supporting strategies. The meetings offered a chance for the public and representatives of the city council, planning commission, Ann Arbor Transportation Authority, and DDA to learn about and discuss various strategies — from unbundling parking from housing costs to using valet services as a way of expanding evening curb parking capacity.

Later that spring, focus groups reviewed the team's preliminary parking recommendations. Many participants were pleasantly surprised to note that some of their proposals were echoed by an opposing interest group. Extended evening transit service, for example, was popular with both the alternative modes group and the business community.

Specific recommendations were refined in follow-up focus groups, where funding possibilities and implementation responsibilities were identified. The transportation authority, with its overstressed budget, listened with interest as DDA representatives put forth their agency as a potential financial backer of both express bus operations and extended evening transit services.

By the second open house, it was apparent that those who wished to yell about parking in Ann Arbor had largely done so. New ideas were floated and debated, but the storm had passed.

Results

On June 11, 2007, the project team presented its recommendations for a downtown parking policy and set of supporting actions to the city council. The material was comprehensive, progressive, and thoroughly vetted. The extensive public process, which might have raised concerns about watering down the final recommendations, instead gave weight to many challenging recommendations. Among them:

- Approach parking holistically and exhaust demand management options before

investing in new supply.

- Create a parking benefit district pilot program (in a section of downtown where the concept was well received), including setting meter rates based on availability targets and returning revenue to local improvements.
- Implement commuter express bus service — a completely new type of service and ridership market for the local transportation authority.
- Initiate valet parking services — a publicly managed service that would meet evening parking demand; make use of available but little-used off-street capacity; and allow customers to "park once" while visiting many destinations.
- Adopt pricing strategies. Replace monthly permits with debit accounts, tying costs to levels of use and rates to levels of demand.

The city council unanimously approved all of the recommendations.

Today, people in Ann Arbor still yell about parking. Some dream of unpaved commutes to downtown jobs, while others envision a sea of free parking around their business. But over the course of a year, the community managed to have a serious discussion about parking and constructed an official, comprehensive downtown parking policy based on shared goals and community values, a policy that could play a big part in transforming Ann Arbor into a center for smart growth in the region.

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