Appendix 42

Developing a Retail Parking Support Strategy

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The provision of short-term, retail supportive parking is a key issue to encourage and strengthen the resurgence of downtown Norman. Specific strategies and approaches are outlined below.

Characteristics of Effective Retail Parking

Revitalizing retail in a downtown setting is one of the most difficult elements of downtown revitalization to get right. Convenient, plentiful and easily accessible parking is especially critical to the success of retail in a downtown area.

What is often overlooked or underestimated in retail revitalization projects is a comprehensive "retail parking strategy". In many cases this will involve significant investment in new parking infrastructure or at least a restructuring or reallocation of existing parking resources. Once the parking supply issues have been addressed, a wide range of parking management strategies should also be considered.

Taking a comprehensive approach to downtown retail parking is important because of the significant differences in the downtown environment compared to "the competition" i.e., suburban malls or the big box store approach. The suburban malls and big box stores have several obvious advantages over downtowns.

- Plentiful land on which to provide cheap (perceived as free) surface parking
- Simple, easily understood access characterized by direct line of sight from the parking lot to the store(s)
- Generally high levels of service as expressed through short walking distances, more generous parking stall widths, etc.
- Single ownership/control and dedicated parking resources
- More ability to control employee parking behaviors through direct management

Downtowns have, in recent years, seen unparalleled success in their revitalization efforts. It is interesting to note that this success has not gone unnoticed by the shopping center industry. They have adapted their strategies to stay competitive. There is only one enclosed (now considered "old style") mall under construction in the US this year. The new trend for shopping centers is "Life Style Centers". These new shopping destinations emulate the character and features of "genuine downtowns" or "main streets". They often have all the amenities of downtowns and few of the "warts". The worst that can be said of them is that they lack that ineffable quality that comes with time, history and the diversity of a real downtown. They may feel inauthentic and "cookie cutterish". However, they usually have plentiful, well located and (very often) free parking.

While we can rarely start with a "clean slate" in downtown environments when it comes to parking, there are some basic principles relative to effective retail parking strategies that can be employed to give retail a fighting chance in the downtown. The key elements of a downtown retail parking strategy are outlined below:

I. **On-street Parking** – As the most conveniently located parking assets (and therefore the most valuable), effective management of on-street parking is critical. This generally includes:

- On-street parking being prioritized for short-term, visitor parking.
- On-street parking being priced higher than off-street parking.
- Having an effective and consistent parking enforcement function – the primary goal of which is to enforce the rules designed to promote on-street space turnover.
- Having an effective combination of time-limits to support the specific uses on downtown retailers. For example, coffee shops and dry cleaners have different needs than restaurants and clothing stores.
- The use of easy to read/color-coded time-limit stickers on meters is a simple but important tool that lets drivers know the time-limit of an on-street space before pulling in to park.
- Having an effective downtown loading zone plan to support retail deliveries.
- Implementing a fine structure for on-street parking that is more forgiving to the occasional violator and more aggressive toward the real problem – repeat long-term parkers taking up what should be short-term parking.
- Defining a well-developed legislative framework that supports enforcement practices (such as having a local ordinance that requires vehicles to move more than 1 block face after moving from one time-limited space to another.)
- The use of new parking enforcement technologies to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of enforcement efforts, such as computerized parking enforcement hardware and software programs and mobile license plate recognition systems with GPS capability.
- Consistent but unpredictable parking enforcement routes.
- A combination of on-street parking rates, fines and enforcement that ultimately promotes a consistent 15% vacancy rate for on-street spaces. Having a 15% on-street vacancy rate is considered important because it makes the downtown area appear to be more accessible and encourages potential customers to stop and shop if they see a well-designed storefront that appeals to them.
- In combination with the strategy above, providing signage about the availability of off-street retail parking is also important so that customers feel they have choices.
- The use of new on-street parking meter technologies that provide more customer-friendly payment options (this can either be multi-space meter or new single space meters that accept credit or debit cards) is becoming a primary strategy for downtowns. This has been aided by technological advances that incorporate wireless communications and solar power to reduce system installation costs.

II. **Off-street Parking** – In a downtown environment the primary issues related to retail parking are to provide large, easy-to-find reservoirs of parking within close proximity to the retail cores or corridors. Small pockets of off-street parking may be useful for those who frequent the downtown area, but these resources are not adequate to effectively support a successful retail "hot spot". Specific issues for retail parking include:

- As much as practical, retail parking reservoirs should be located within line-of-sight of the retail anchors and very convenient to the contiguous retail corridors.
- The street level of retail parking structures should be designed to maintain the street-level activation of the area by incorporation retail into the at-grade level. To support this primary design criterion, higher first floor heights should be planned.
- To the greatest degree practical, designing for a higher parking facility level of service of "user comfort factor" is recommended. Creation of a defined set of parking garage design criteria with higher levels of service for short-term retail is recommended. These design criteria include such items as more generous parking bay and stall width dimensions, end-bay turn radii, floor-to-floor heights, enhanced lighting, etc.
- For a parking facility that is specifically designed to support a retail patronage, "user comfort factors" of A or B are recommended (high ease of use standards).
- Direct connections from the retail parking structure to a retail anchor (via sky bridge, for example) are desirable features.
- The perception of safety and security is critically important for a retail parking facility. Recommended design strategies for improving parking facility security include: glass-backed stair and elevator towers, adopting enhanced lighting levels (in excess of IES minimum requirements), painting interiors white to improve lighting reflectivity and enhancing the feeling of openness, securing the areas beneath stairwells, etc.
- Effective wayfinding and facility signage is essential. Parking signage should be a significant element of a comprehensive wayfinding program. As we do a better job of architecturally incorporating parking into mixed-use facilities, sometimes we "hide the parking" too well. Because of this, enhanced parking facility entrance signage is also very important.
- Other interior facility enhancements such as creative level-theming concepts, interior wayfinding and level identification signage can also help make garages more colorful, visually interesting and aid patrons by making it easier to remember where they parked. This approach can also be used to connect with other community groups – for example some communities engage local artists by using garage level theming projects as art competitions. Similar projects include turning bike racks and bus stops into opportunities for community art.

III. **Overall Parking Management** - From a management and operations perspective, there are many effective strategies that downtown parking programs can employ to better support the larger community's strategic goals. Parking programs too often become focused on parking facility revenues or enforcement quotas to justify their programs. The best programs are those with a broader perspective and that align their policies to help the communities they serve achieve success. Often, by doing this, they achieve an even higher level of success themselves – both in terms of stimulating additional traffic (and therefore parking revenue) and also by becoming a valued and integral partner in the success of the downtown. The following is a short-list of strategies to frame the possibilities:

- Programs such as a "First Hour Free" for off-street public parking facilities can make downtown appear more visitor friendly while providing both a more equitable program and simplifying the administration of traditional parking validation programs. While we support programs such as "First Hour Free" as an element of a larger downtown revitalization initiative, we recognize that paid parking in a downtown environment is a basic economic reality. We support the philosophy that "Parking should be friendly – not free". In one community where the "First Hour Free" program was enacted, parking rates were reassessed after four years. The downtown stakeholders were given a choice of no rate increase, but elimination of the "First Hour Free" program and they unequivocally wanted to keep the "First Hour Free". This intrigued us enough to do some more research. It turned out that in the four years the "First Hour Free" had been in effect, downtown sale tax revenues had doubled and the average parking transient length of stay had grown from 2.11 hours to 3.56 hours. Not all of this is direct attributable to the "First Hour Free" program, but the downtown merchants credited the program as one of the key elements to the revitalization of the downtown.

- Another positive trend in the industry is the reinvestment of a portion of on-street and enforcement parking revenues back into the districts from which they were generated. This reinvestment can take the form of financial contributions to downtown organizations to promote the marketing of the district, investment in specific district projects such as wayfinding projects, area wide Wi-Fi, flower basket programs, pop jet fountains, banner programs, etc. This reinvestment makes the districts more attractive and customer friendly and therefore more successful. It also makes the local merchants more tolerant of needed paid parking and enforcement programs, because they see the benefits of not only the increased on-street space turnover, but also tangible downtown improvements that their customers appreciate.

- In off-street retail parking facilities, the lower levels (or more accurately, the most convenient parking areas) should be reserved for retail customer use. Employees or other groups should be assigned to park in other areas of the facility. Depending on the facility design, enforcement of these allocation strategies can often be enhanced through the use of what is termed "nested parking areas" using access control gates and card readers.

- Improving the training and customer service of frontline parking employees can have a huge effect because of all the individual "touches" parking staff make with the public on a daily basis. Training parking staff (cashiers, maintenance and enforcement staff) to adopt the role of "downtown ambassadors" rather than just parking attendants is a key attitude shift that should be actively promoted.

- Painting the interior of parking facilities and adding color (either through level theming graphics or even advertisements) can enhance parking facility interior environments and make facilities feel brighter and safer. Generally speaking, parking facilities have been treated as very utilitarian structures – at best they were dull, grey and functional. At worst, they were dark, scary and dangerous. Investment in parking facility interior facility enhancements is part of making downtowns a more interesting and attractive destination.

- The use of newer technologies and more customer friendly parking access and revenue control systems can reduce wait times upon exiting and improve customer service by providing more convenient customer payment options.
- These days there is a both a "real world" and a "virtual program identity" on-line. Enhancing parking websites with effective tools such as interactive parking maps, on-line payment options, parking rate, special events and other information is expected these days. An important "best practice" in this area is a website that provides a comprehensive overview of downtown including retail and restaurant offering, cultural and special event venues and of course parking and transportation info. The best websites have an overall map of the downtown with the ability to turn on each of the elements above as a "map overlay".
- Leveraging all of these program enhancements into a recognizable parking "Program Brand" can make people associate all the program enhancements with the public parking facilities and therefore they are more comfortable with downtown parking. Some communities even have radio ads promoting their parking system. In some communities, the public parking programs have made such noticeable strides forward that all the private parking operations were forced to also raise the standards of their operations. We call this the "high tide raises all boats" phenomenon.