



SOWING SEEDS, HARVESTING REWARDS

How parking and
gardening come
together to improve
cities and towns

By L. Dennis Burns, CAPP

My job as a consultant provides three great benefits I treasure. The first is that, when done right, it is a continuous learning experience. The second is that the travel allows me to see and keep in touch with a wide network of professional colleagues and friends. The third is the somewhat unique perspective one can gain from visiting so many different places and programs and watching them evolve over time.

Perspective and Progress

One of the big lessons I've tried to impart to my municipal clients over the years is to be patient (often easier said than done, I'll grant you) and, at the same time, observant and ready to move when opportunities present themselves. This lesson seems especially relevant to the progress being made in mid-sized municipal parking programs around the country.

It has been said that "optimists see the donut; pessimists see the hole." It is sometimes easy to be pessimistic when you, as the parking professional, can see a clear path to parking program enhancement and know the changes that could be made in one short year would be nothing short of transformative for the community. When this potential progress is stifled due to lack of vision, politics, funding, or other factors, it can be deeply frustrating.

The fact that I get to come and go from different environments creates a different perspective on program development and evolution. Over the past 10 years or so, I have seen much change and progress (dramatic progress in some cases) in many mid-sized municipal parking programs. For some, it took a change in city leadership such as a new mayoral regime taking over, while in others, change was sparked by a departmental reorganization, the retirement of one individual, or just a shift in momentum brought on by a new approach or the creation of new partnerships.

The Gardening Analogy

Have you seen the movie "Being There," starring Peter Sellers and written by Jersey Kosinski? (If not, you should!) Sellers plays the main character: one Chauncey Gardiner, a simple, unsophisticated, and uneducated (except by television) man whose works as (you guessed

it) a gardener. Following the death of his aging employer and through a series of accidental events, Chauncey is thrust into a very high-profile role when he is introduced to a politically connected millionaire. His simplistic responses to the media and others, which are based on gardening, are suddenly seen as brilliant and insightful. He begins to be seen not as simple but nearly enlightened.

Chauncey's gardening analogies reminded me of how working in the municipal parking environment appears from my perspective. My somewhat seasonal visits highlight progress that, to locals, must appear as slow, incremental, or non-existent. On the contrary—the lack of progress seems to jump out more starkly to me. In response to questions such as, "Why hasn't that been taken care of?" I often hear, "Wow, I pass by that every day and don't even see it anymore!"

Transformative Programs

The keys to igniting the transformations that are occurring in these municipal parking programs are multi-dimensional, and each community has followed different paths to get where it is today, but there are some common themes we can explore using the gardening analogy.

- Weather and the environment. Farmers are all too familiar with the fact that they are, to some degree, at the mercy of the environment. Draught, excessive rain, financial issues, and commodity prices all have the potential to affect the growing season and the success of the enterprise. They have no choice but to do everything they can to ensure that the fundamental elements are in place and then hope for the best.

Many of the communities in which I have worked have created plans that could have been transformative and had the potential to generate positive



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log jam that leads to a flood of change and improvement. The real harvest, however, is when parking program enhancements begin to have positive effects in support of larger community strategic goals and improved downtown vitality.

Case Study: Park Cedar Rapids

Following the horrific flooding of 2008, the City of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, rolled up its sleeves to not only rebuild, but reinvent and improve itself. Parking program enhancement had been a goal of many in the downtown community for some time. Following the flood, the municipal government tackled thousands

community contributions in a variety of areas beyond just parking, but for a variety of reasons (i.e. political, environmental, financial), progress was slow. This can, of course, be very frustrating and even demoralizing. Sometimes we just have to persevere and be ready when conditions for growth present themselves. Considering the environment when selecting which seeds to plant is critical.

- Preparing the soil. Each of these communities went through a process of having prepared the soil. This is done through processes of internal reassessment, community outreach and feedback, and issues identification, followed by ongoing program refinement and community education.
- Planting the seeds. Identifying the key issues, understanding the unique characteristics of the community, and working through a well-developed planning process leads to the creation of a community-specific set of strategies and action items (knowing what seeds to plant and when). Through this process, we have planted the seeds for program development and change.
- Tending the garden. Some time is required before we have a healthy, productive garden. It takes months of tending the soil, keeping down the weeds, fertilizing, and watering the planting beds, before we can expect results. Young plants are fragile and need constant attention. Sometimes it seems like in parking, once we have a plan, we expect instant results. This is where patience, diligence, and optimism come into play.
- Harvest time! Through the lenses of time and perspective, I have come to see that when the time is right, change will occur. In some cities, I can see slow and steady improvements that gained momentum over time. In other cases, it is like the sudden breaking of a

of flood-related issues that included basic clean-up, temporary government services relocation, FEMA coordination, and future flood mitigation planning.

It was within this context that a jointly-funded parking plan was authorized by the Cedar Rapids Downtown Association (representing downtown businesses) and the city. It was important that the parking plan not just be another plan and that it not be a stand-alone plan. Rather, what the community needed was a plan focused on implementation and action, and one that would be fully integrated and aligned with the larger community strategic goals.

The thing that makes this case study special is the incredible job of implementation that has occurred in Cedar Rapids. Vanessa Rogers and her team pushed the implementation plan forward at a pace that, frankly, I have never seen before. Credit should also be given to Jon Rouse and Republic Parking for their efforts to bring about the amazing changes that are clearly evident. Investments in new on-street parking technology, including the adoption of new more customer-friendly parking payment options, the implementation of several significant new policies, ongoing renovations to the parking structures, and the rebranding of the parking program are but a few of the significant areas of accomplishment.

This more action-oriented and strategic approach has paid huge dividends for the community. An outcome of the strategic parking plan was that the parking function was transitioned to the Cedar Rapids Downtown Association (now the Cedar Rapids Metro Economic Alliance), which allowed the city to address the myriad different priorities it faced with its flood recovery efforts and gave parking the special focus it needed from a group that was passionate about advancing the parking plan.



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Some accomplishments of Park Cedar Rapids—the result of the plan—are:

- Parking system management reorganization. Transferred strategic oversight of the parking system from the City of Cedar Rapids to the Downtown District.
- Parking access revenue control system replacement. Replaced flood-damaged system for four parking ramps
- On-street parking program adjustments and upgrades. Installed 40 new credit and debit card enabled multi-space parking meters and launched a pay-by-phone/mobile app program.
- Off-street parking pricing structure adjustments. Implemented a demand-based tiered parking pricing strategy; prices went from \$30 across all facilities (decreased from \$50 per month pre-flood) to a range of \$25 to \$75, depending on location. They also implemented a carte blanche pass that is more expensive, limited in number, and permits the parker to use any non-reserved, non-handicapped space at any time.
- Parking ramp refurbishment. Installed new energy-

efficient LED lighting in one parking ramp (saving 50 percent per month in utility costs, on average).

- New downtown development and parking supply additions. Successfully lobbied the city council to move forward with plans to build a new 500-space parking ramp to support the new Cedar Rapids Convention Center. Also successfully lobbied to move forward with plans to build a second 500-space parking ramp to support a new federal courthouse building.
- Successfully launched the new “Park Cedar Rapids” brand.

What is not stated above and is even more important is the positive effect that all these changes have made on the downtown. Parking is no longer perceived as the intractable problem with no solutions in sight, but is now seen as a positive contributor to a community that is roaring back to life and prosperity.

I am reminded of a quote from Vita Sackville-West, who said, “The person who has planted a garden feels that they have done something for the good of the world.”



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