



THE TIES  
**THAT  
BIND**

When it comes to parking, cities face common challenges and opportunities.

When we think about different cities, we tend to think about what sets them apart. Omaha, Neb., with 421,570 residents in 130.58 square miles, may seem like a middle-American oasis where the pace of life is slower and old-fashioned values still reign. Beverly Hills, population 34,290 in 5.7 square miles, is the elegant community where the rich and famous live—swimming pools, movie stars. Each city has its own distinctive flavor.

But when it comes to parking, cities have more in common than we might think. In spite of each community's unique population, business community, and geographic characteristics, cities across North America share many of the same parking challenges. According to parking directors and consultants, cities tend to face the same parking issues and challenges, and parking officials can

learn a lot about how to overcome them from the experiences of other cities.

### How Much Parking Is Too Much?

One of the biggest challenges facing cities is the decades-old practice of mandating parking minimums for new development. According to Kenneth Smith, CAPP, city parking director in Omaha, parking minimums were part of “the suburban modeling that came about after World War II.”

“Today, cities are starting to rethink that suburban modeling,” says Smith. “They are starting to look at parking maximums rather than minimums.”

Steffen Turoff, parking planner with Walker Parking Consultants, agrees that the question of how much parking is needed is a vital one.

“The traditional suburban model requires that every property not only must provide its own parking, but in most cases, must do so on the same parcel,” says Turoff. “When you put that kind of requirement on properties in a dense downtown area, the spatial constraints can make satisfying the parking requirement economically unfeasible, if not physically impossible.

“Also,” he adds, “many cities find that the dirty little secret of off-street parking requirements is that although the additional off-street parking is supposed to reduce parking demand and occupancy for their on-street spaces, the typical driver would still rather park on the street. A municipality may have to pay more attention to its

on-street parking management and pricing strategies if it wants people to utilize some

of those off-street spaces it's requiring and not keep circling the block in search of a cheap and conveniently-located on-street space.”

Beverly Hills faces these very challenges. According to Chad Lynn, CAPP, director of parking operations for the city, it still views parking through a traditional lens. There is very little shared parking in town, so while parking spaces may be well utilized during the day, they go largely empty at night.

“Beverly Hills has always approached parking with the philosophy of ‘if you are building it, you have to park it,’” says Lynn. “One of the biggest challenges is educating the community about the benefits of shared parking and using parking planning more strategically.”

Smith, Turoff, and Lynn all agree that communication is vital—and not always easy. “Parking tends to be an afterthought for people,” says Smith.

Parking planning, though, is an essential element of urban planning. It plays a vital role in downtown business development and the quality of life in any community. Parking managers across the country often struggle with how to keep the public informed about their parking plans and how those plans benefit the community.

### Dollars and Sense

Financing is always a challenge for cities and towns. There never seems to be enough money to pay for day-to-day operations and key initiatives. And with a plethora of municipal agencies and departments, it can be difficult to manage the various financial aspects of keeping a city running.

When it comes to parking, financial challenges are often exacerbated by the fact that different operational responsibilities are paid for through different budgets.



One budget covers capital improvements while another might cover enforcement and still another administration. The technology revolution that is making parking administration much more efficient and affordable is actually triggering new financial challenges.

Traditionally, cities' greatest outlays have been made to pay for the capital costs associated with developing and maintaining parking facilities. Administrative funds were typically set aside to pay for enforcement and management. Today, however, new technologies are constantly being introduced that can save cities and towns thousands of dollars a year in operational costs. The problem is they tend to operate through subscriptions and municipal budgets are often set up to accommodate large one-time capital outlays rather than ongoing payments.

"Separate budgets are a huge issue," says Turoff. "We sometimes work on projects where the introduction of a new policy, operational procedure, or technology could significantly reduce the number of parking spaces the owner must build, and the capital expenditure associated with those spaces. But while the budget has been approved and is sitting in an account for the construction of those spaces, those same funds cannot be tapped for additional operations staff, a cash-out program to reduce employee parking demand, or new parking guidance technology that could shave 15 percent off that capital expenditure.

"You could spend \$200,000 for a technology that will save \$2 million, but most cities can't do that because their parking funds are sitting in a capital development budget rather than an operational budget," says Turoff.

The parking industry is rapidly changing as newer and better technological tools are introduced. Cities and towns need to move with this trend.

"The industry seems to be shifting from capital investment to ongoing investment," says Lynn. "We need to rethink the way we allocate money to pay for parking planning and administration."

### The Promise of the Technology Age

Of course, cities share more than common challenges. The trends that are sweeping the industry are benefiting different cities in similar ways.

"We introduced smart meters in Omaha several months ago, and they are already providing important benefits," says Smith. "They allow us to gather data about parking habits and peak usage so we evaluate our current pricing and create pricing models for everyday parking and events."

Lynn agrees. "Credit card meter technology has opened up the possibility of adjusting our rates to

better meet the city's revenue and urban planning needs," he says. "In the past, we were limited in how much we could charge because there are only so many quarters people can carry around to pay for parking. Smart meters have had a profound impact on the city's revenue stream."

According to Lynn, Beverly Hills, like many cities and towns, charged too little for valuable on-street parking spaces for years. Not only did the city sacrifice valuable revenues, but traditional pricing models that undervalued parking limited parking's effects on the city's overall urban and business development plans.

Mobile payment is another trend that is benefiting many cities. Omaha is on the cusp of introducing mobile payment at each of its 5,000 metered spaces. According to Smith, mobile payment will pay immediate dividends to parkers by providing another convenient payment option. It will also help streamline the city's enforcement program and allow Omaha's parking administration to monitor when parking spaces in various parts of the city are most likely to be occupied, and to make strategic planning decisions based on that utilization data.

There is one area where technology's benefits come with accompanying challenges though. There are hundreds of different technologies that help streamline operations in different ways. But they have to be able to integrate with each other to work properly. For instance, a cloud-based storage management program that is used by enforcement officers needs to work with the handheld software tools they are already using. As new tools are introduced and implemented, it becomes that much more complicated to integrate them into one seamless system.

"The great thing about technology is that it's constantly being upgraded," says Lynn. "But when you upgrade a system you have to figure out how much it will affect the other tools you're using."

Smith agrees, saying "The key to integration is making sure that all of the tools have open architecture to integrate enforcement, on- and off-street parking tools, and parking apps. It would be nice to have one app that will work across the board, but for now all you can do is make sure that everything you're working on can be coordinated."

"The new technologies show great promise, but they aren't without challenges," says Turoff, "particularly in the early stages of implementation. Because many cities are exploring the use of these new technologies, it's good to find out what the experience of other cities has been first, including any problems with integration."

There are many things that set cities apart: the people who live there, the businesses they have, their traditions. Each is unique. But when it comes to parking, there is more binding them together than separating them. **P**



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