

ALONG

Charlotte, N.C., successfully pilots a curb lane management program that eases congestion and simplifies uptown parking.

By Clement Gibson, CAPP, and Doreen Szymanski

The city of Charlotte is reorganizing curb lane use in its uptown area and erecting newly-designed signage that communicates the changes to motorists. Through an integrated approach for all of Charlotte's uptown streets, curb lane users will discover a more uniform use pattern that communicates what is allowed and where. Charlotte's Department of Transportation (CDOT) has implemented a pilot project on its main street—Tryon St.—that is considered successful.



THE CURB




ANYTIME
TOW-AWAY ZONE
704-336-7600

LOADING
7AM-6PM
30 MIN LIMIT

TAXI
6PM-7AM

THIS SIDE OF SIGN

7AM
TOW ZONE
704-336-7600

MON-FRI
9AM
2 HR LIMIT

MON-FRI
4PM
TOW ZONE
704-336-7600

MON-FRI
6PM
TOW ZONE
704-336-7600

TAXI
EVERYDAY

Residents of Charlotte, N.C. helped pick new parking signage by participating in a survey.



Charlotte has seen significant growth the past two decades, with the population growing from 350,000 to 750,000. Since the reinstatement of metered parking in 1997, uptown land uses have changed significantly. Uptown Charlotte is one of the fastest-growing national metropolitan areas in the U.S., and the city's uptown boasts more than 70,000 workers, more than 13,000 residents, 120 restaurants, and 50 nightspots. The city has a National Football League stadium, a National Basketball Association sports arena, several cultural venues, the NASCAR Hall of Fame, and a AAA-class baseball park under construction, along with an urban park. The on-street parking system now has 1,200 metered public parking spaces that share curb space with other competing interests, and the system continues to improve and grow.



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A Study is Born

Charlotte's growth has generated additional demand for curb lane use, including commercial and passenger loading zones (i.e., delivery, valet, taxi services, and kiss and rides), and on-street parking spaces that attract uptown visitors. Over the years, as requests were made for changing curb uses, CDOT tried to become all things to all people, and as the saying goes, "please all, please none." As motorists' and elected officials' complaints escalated and the city's parking office noted increasing numbers of irate customers and parking citation appeals, city officials decided it was time to reevaluate one of its most valuable assets—the curb lane.

In the summer of 2011, CDOT issued a request for proposal for a curb lane management study. Subsequently, the city contracted with Kimley-Horn and Associates to evaluate existing uptown area curb lane uses, with the ultimate goal of enhancing the uptown experience for all users. The contractor was asked to be consistent with the city's Center City Transportation Plan, which places a priority on the pedestrian experience.

In support of the study goals, street priorities were identified by type to determine which curb lane uses should take precedence over others. Block face templates were created that standardized uses along the curb face to address motorist expectations while providing guidance for current and future changes. Staff was able to consolidate the many alternatives into one master template that provides sufficient flexibility to implement in almost all blocks. The template requires all loading to take place at block ends, with public parking located in the center section. However, when other uses are not needed in a block, public parking is permitted along the entire block.

Implementation

Following the successful outcome of the signage preference survey, CDOT implemented the pilot project on Tryon Street, which had the most highly used curb lane in uptown. Testing the street could be the best of times or the worst of times. CDOT personnel felt confident that redistributing curb uses according to the template and installing new signage were steps that would guarantee a positive outcome.

The Curb Lane Management Study recommended removal of existing rush hour restrictions on Tryon Street. CDOT eagerly took advantage of the opportunity to remove those restrictions. This decision was also supported in the Center City Transportation Plan and by Charlotte's uptown development agency, Charlotte Center City Partners.

On the positive side, CDOT knew:

- If the signage worked on the most highly-used curb lanes uptown, it should work on all streets.
- The process included the opportunity to locate appropriate areas and install the area's first on-street accessible spaces.
- Signage installation, meter removals and installations, and pavement markings would cost less than \$20,000.



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There were concerns too:

- The Democratic National Convention was coming to Charlotte. Curb lane management changes had to be made quickly or deferred until after the massive event. It was everyone's desire to have the work completed prior to the convention.
- Charlotte is always touted by visitors as being a very clean city. The city's Solid Waste Services Department is proud of its efforts along these lines, and expressed concerns about street cleaning and waste removal after the planned changes in parking regulations took place. In the past, they performed this work during the rush hour restrictions. However, they agreed to adjust their hours for the test.
- City crews tried to minimize the installation of additional poles in granite curbing and tree wells, and it was essential to use existing poles for sign installation. This required an inventory of every pole on the street and its location.

City staff walked the nearly mile-long street numerous times to inventory poles and note existing uses, and determine future curb use allocation. That information translated into work orders, and the project was quickly implemented.

Measuring Success

One of CDOT's challenges is measuring pilot project success. The goal to reduce motorist confusion about where and when parking is allowed is closely tied to parking sign messages. By removing rush hour restrictions, the most complicated and confusing signage was also eliminated. Ticketing statistics for sign violations have remained steady outside of what used to be the rush hour restricted areas. Also, with an improving economy there is an increase in visitors to Charlotte's uptown. For CDOT staff, it is obvious that tickets and revenues provide a more solid data tool, but data that includes all influencing factors is difficult to obtain. Nevertheless, city staff has deemed the pilot project a success based on a more soft science: fewer complaints. In particular, there have been no complaints by elected officials, and with removal of the rush hour restrictions, fewer tickets and tows.

The city is now reallocating curb lane uses based on other uptown streets in a phased approach as funding is available. City staff also:

- Evaluates streets in conjunction with development and adjust uses as dictated by those changes.
- Evaluates and changes curb use as the city converts some streets from one-way to two-way operation (in particular around the new baseball park, which is under construction).
- Reviews issues by citizen request and implements identified changes if doing so does not create additional confusion for motorists.

Charlotte has a bright future. It continues to be one of the nation's fastest-growing cities, and the city is intent on maintaining an uptown that is welcoming and inviting to all. The Curb Lane Management Study and its findings help ensure that we'll meet those goals. 



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