MYTHBUSTERS

By Kim Fernandez

Figure 2-1:
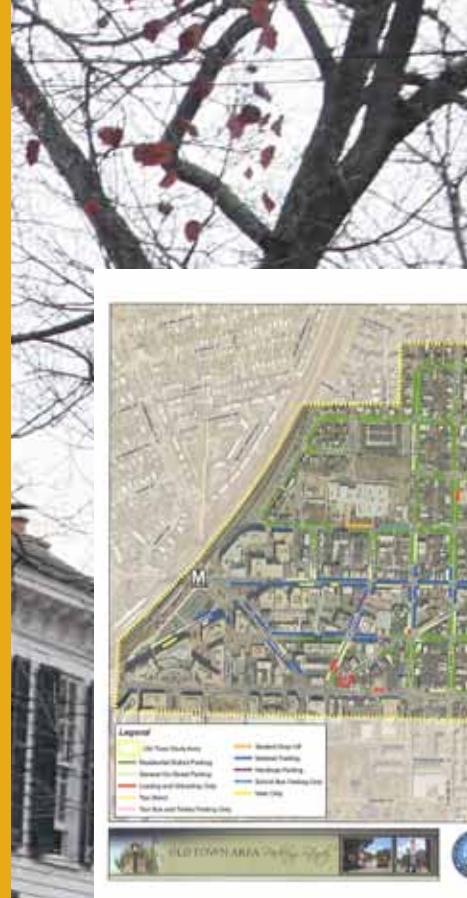On-Street Parking Locations
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Figure 2-13:
Parking Utilization
During Weekday Afternoon
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Alexandria, Va., parking professionals fight back against a perception of not enough parking

What do you do if you're in an historic district that's popular for its shopping, dining, offices, and waterfront scenery, but people say has a lack of parking? If you're Alexandria, Va., you get to work differentiating perception from reality and finding solutions.

"The city has, for a long time, had a lot of questions and concerns about how to best utilize the parking we have, which we see as an asset," says Richard Baier, director of Transportation and Environmental Services (T&ES), City of Alexandria. One of those was how to dispel a feeling among visitors that Old Town in particular—an historic village of cobblestone streets, old homes, and renowned shopping and dining along the city's waterfront—didn't have enough parking to support both residents and tourists. People complained they couldn't park near their destinations, which wasn't doing local businesses any favors. Rather than quickly deciding to adjust parking numbers, however, the city commissioned a parking study to find out what was really going on.

"We needed to examine, based on input from our businesses within the Chamber of Commerce, staff, and residents, the best way to manage this parking," says Baier. And so a study was launched to find out where parking was, why there was a perceived lack of it, and what could be done about it.

The Study

The City of Alexandria commissioned consultants Kimley-Horn to study parking in Old Town, Alexandria over the winter of 2009/2010. The firm studied about 85 blocks in the area, finding more than 8,000 public parking spaces; 53 percent of those were on-street, garages accounted for 42 percent, and surface lots held the last five percent. Private spaces were not included, but the city's data indicates there were an additional 1,700 of those spots in the area.

After counting the total number of spaces available in the area, the consultants conducted accumulation counts over six distinct time periods to determine when spaces were being used where; these ranged from workday hours to both daytime and nighttime weekend periods, to track what happened when office workers went home and social visitors took their places.

After that, calculations were performed to determine how many spaces were available during specific times.

The conclusion? The report said, "The evaluation of

Figure 2-15
Parking Utilization
During Friday Afternoon
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Figure 2-16
Parking Utilization
During Friday Evening
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parking data revealed that the Old Town area does not have an overall supply problem; it has proximity, rate, and facility availability problems." The report broke those challenges down by time of day and block-wide areas that saw the most demand.

"During peak periods, on-street parking and some publicly accessible off-street facilities were effectively full," said the report, going on to point out that there was parking available outside of the immediate tourist area during all of those times.

"For us, the way they broke it down was very helpful in following through on general recommendations," says Baier. "What they said was that we have to prioritize, in this economic time, where we're going to put our resources. The data led us to understand that it's not a question of having enough spaces, but that maybe there aren't enough on certain blocks. We need to better manage those spaces on the street and better direct people to garages and work with our private garages to encourage them to stay open later.

Following Up

Once the study was done, city staff worked with members of the city's parking task force, which included business owners, local officials, and transportation officials, to see how they could best follow its recommendations, which included, among other things, installing multi-space meters with several payment options in high demand blocks; reviewing and adjusting parking rates to increase turnover and discourage long-term parking in prime spots by area workers; decreasing parking times in areas needing more space turnover; decreasing the parking duration time allowed in residential areas to encourage alternate

transportation use or use of other garages; and extending on-street meter hours into the evenings.

"We set up a parking workgroup that included the businesses, retail, office users, hotel representatives, the chamber, and resident groups," says Baier. "And then, we went through and prioritized the issues in the parking report."

Among those priorities was implementing the recommendations for multi-space meters that accepted coins, bills, and credit cards. Then, they started considering on-street parking rates.

"On-street spaces were much cheaper than off-street garage parking," says Baier. "We wanted on-street spaces to be premium, and they had to be at or above the rates for off-street garage space."

That led to some potentially sticky conversations, he says. "This study gave us the ability to, in a collegial way, talk about raising rates. People want to know why you raise rates when you do that. We worked with the community to accomplish that goal." That included holding off on changing rates on the first day that was chosen, to install new equipment and ensure that customers had the option to pay with credit cards. They also wanted to be sure business owners understood why rates would change, so they could get behind the move.

"We wanted them to see that we'd capture that one hour stay on King Street [the main retail/dining strip through town]," he says. "We wanted those spaces to turn over. We didn't want people parking there for three or four hours, and with that, the likelihood that there would be a space available on every block would rise."

Figure 2-17: Parking Utilization During Saturday Afternoon | 2-17

Figure 2-18: Parking Utilization During Saturday Evening | 2-18

Others Help Out

Commuters who work in Alexandria, Va., have had a quiet alternative for all-day parking for more than two decades now, and everyone involved says it works out beautifully.

St. Mary Catholic Church is just off the beaten path of the Old Town business district. Every morning, more than 100 drivers leave their vehicles in a church lot and walk a few blocks to work knowing they don't need to worry about moving their cars or losing their spaces if they need to leave during the day.

"We rent the spaces out to people who work in Old Town for a very low rate—$50 per month," says church secretary Beth Copps. It makes sense: the church has that income to count on, and commuters take advantage of reliable spaces at a lower-than-retail price.

"If there's a Mass or a funeral or something, they can get blocked in," says Copps. "That's made known to them right away, and it works out."

At present, the church has a three-year wait list for its spaces, and that's come very naturally. "It's all been word of mouth," says Copps. "We do not advertise it and never have."

"It's a service," she says. "We try to be good neighbors. Parking is at a premium in Old Town, and this is something we can do that's mutually beneficial."

Another big change was adding signage directing people from the area's main traffic arteries to public garages, which hadn't always been well-marked. This posed its own challenges, as no one wanted signage to mar the area's quaint, historic look and feel.

"We took this to the board of architectural review even though they don't have jurisdiction on these signs," says Baier. "We wanted to get their input on how those signs would look." Everyone agreed that lighted signs were needed, and they were installed throughout town with architectural detail around them.

"They're a matte finish instead of glossy," he explains. "They have a dark finish instead of a brightly colored frame. The supports themselves are mast arms that resemble those of our street signs and gas lamp posts. All of those features also have a dark, matte finish."

While no post-study has been done to date, Baier says he's hopeful that the changes will make a big difference in the area.

"The study showed that the garages were largely under-used by 10 to 40 percent," he says. "At the same time, on-street parking was totally utilized. That fully supported the finding that people couldn't find or weren't aware of the public parking garages."

Community Involvement

Critical to the success of the parking changes made in Alexandria was community buy-in, but even that wasn't as simple as it might seem.

"It's difficult when you're talking about policy change to have people turn out to engage in the discussion," says Baier. "The reason is that a lot of our businesses are small. They're sole proprietorships. The managers and owners can't get away to attend meetings without closing their businesses. We tried in a variety of ways to get the word out, and the reaction we've had has largely been, 'We're willing to accept the increase in rates if it translates to a greater accommodation to a broad spectrum of customers.' If people don't have to walk around with a change purse, that's a big improvement, and the increased rates are paying for the 125 multi-space meters that were purchased and installed by the city to provide

QR Codes on Alexandria's multi-space meters provide parkers and passers-by with visitor and parking information, and information about the city's free trolley, and allow people to report problems with parking meters.

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that accommodation."

Baier says responding to the parking study will be a multi-year effort. In 2012, he hopes to settle remaining questions about disabled users of meters (Alexandria allows four hours of free parking for those with handicapped permits), and pushing additional parkers away from some side streets that are still seeing too much long-term use, leaving little space for short-term visitors in peak periods.

"The other big issue for us in 2012 is working with garages to extend their ability to be open later to accommodate our evening visitors," he says. "They have liability concerns with that, and those are a longer-term concern for us as well." Further down the road will come improving alternative transportation options, particularly when it comes to getting people from the area's Metro rail station a few miles down the street to the harbor area.

Baier says the study has absolutely been worth the effort, and has provided a clear road map to moving away from the "not enough parking" myth and into a reality where spaces are available in all areas during all times of the day and night. "The most important thing to us was defining a scope of work that would reflect the needs of the community," he says. "That includes our visitors, our businesses, and our residents." **Ⓟ**