

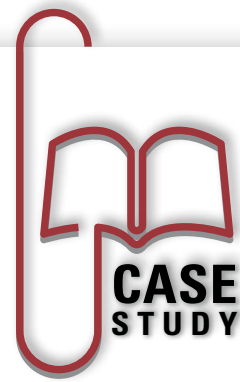
Maximizing Change,

MINIMIZING PAIN

BY GARRETT COLEMAN



How the 601 Travis Garage underwent a complete update and upgrade without inconveniencing its customers.



Does the idea of upgrading your parking facility’s payment systems raise the hair on the back of your neck from the thought of lanes being shut down, traffic jams, issuing new monthly access credentials, and facing a complete database transfer? Upgrading a garage parking system does not have to be as challenging as one might think. A well thought-out plan and cooperation by all involved partners can make a huge difference. First, take the time to really study how the garage functions. Second, gather input from those who deal with everyday operations. Third, get opinions from customers—after all, they will be the ones to experience your changes.

The 601 Travis Garage is a premier garage in Houston. Built in 1982 and managed by Hines Interests, this parking structure consists of 2,194 parking spaces in 12 stories. It offers monthly contract parking to more than 2,300 parkers, both lease tenants of the 600 Travis office tower across the street and other customers who work in the downtown area, and 1,656 spaces are set aside for unreserved monthly parking or visitor parking charged on an hourly rate. A wide variety of validations are offered to the tenants of 600 Travis.

The Challenges

At times, it could be difficult to find a parking spot in this facility for those other than monthly contract parkers who are familiar with the layout of the garage. The original configuration added challenges and delays with throughput of traffic because of equipment layout and design. Originally laid out with a limited number of lanes for non-monthly parkers to exit, traffic flow problems existed at times. Cashiering processes could be slow and those in the queue waiting to get out became impatient. More options and more lanes for visitors were clearly needed.

The access control technology of proximity card readers contributed to slow entry and exit procedures. Validation was labor-intensive and prevented the garage

from becoming fully automated. Of course, the challenges all manned cashier booth operations face contributed to more oversight labor costs.

The former system was a mixture of products from various manufacturers that were outdated, and age had taken its toll on the equipment. Operational and financial accountability required a great number of man hours to accomplish. Repair costs were very high.



Launching Solutions

Winpark Parking Management reengineered the garage using some of the latest technological solutions available to the parking industry. After several studies that accounted for traffic flow, peak time operations, manpower requirements, cost of ownership, return on investment, and other factors that affect daily operations, Winpark created an RFP for a totally new approach to running the garage.

Selecting the right business partners to introduce a new system takes time. Comparing not just the purchase price but more importantly, a reliable supplier, installer, and training program is not a fast process, but it's one owners are wise to invest in. Managers needed to be sure that the transition was seamless, as changes would affect a wide range of users who were familiar with the old ways

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and would face adapting to completely new procedures.

Winpark selected WPS Parking Systems and Commercial Parking Solutions (CPS) to handle the transformation. "I understood the importance of uptime in a parking garage system and I knew I had to use a creative approach for this project to minimize any downtime" says David Culbreth, president, Commercial Parking Solutions.

The new system needed to address new technology for access and revenue control. Custom interfacing was provided that enabled Winpark to close areas of potential fraudulent abuse of garage services and at the same time, reduce manpower hours for accounting procedures; those costs were then applied to the return on investment (ROI). Implementing solutions such as AVI access control (that enabled the use of already-existing Texas Tollways AVI tags), online validations through the cloud (eliminating the formerly used, costly process of printing validation stickers), converting to pay-in-lane and credit card-only exit terminals (which eliminated manual cashier labor costs), the ability to operate 24/7, and lane equipment that had the lowest cost of ownership were all advantages of this new system.

Making it Happen

Once decisions were made, implementation was launched. CPS installed all new lane equipment adjacent to existing equipment so the existing equipment could keep operations going while its replacement was connected to the new head end system. As the new system came to life, databases were transferred, AVI readers were tweaked to optimal readability, cloud validation software was deployed to tenants, and initial training was accomplished, all of which led to a virtually seamless transition.

Installing and incorporating cameras is a no-brainer in any transition from manned cashier booths to auto-

mated systems that include validation and pay equipment around a garage. They were installed as part of this upgrade, and not only help when remote assistance is needed through intercom calls, but also provide credible records for holding vehicle owners liable for damage caused to parking equipment.

Issuing new AVI tags to those who needed them and collecting tag information from contract parkers who already had tags from the Texas Tollways system was a continual effort during the early stages to avoid as much confusion as possible when the new system went live. Using AVI technology meant the garage could fill and empty at a much faster rate than pre-renovation, and the hands-free technology was well received by monthly parkers, especially those who already had state-issued toll road tags.

The transformation also required an extensive upgrade to the physical structure in the lanes. The old system was designed around each piece of equipment being mounted on a raised steel platform that had bollards welded in each corner. Conduits were exposed, and years of being bumped and refinished were obvious. "Replacing the metal islands was something I'd never faced in the few dozen garage installations I'd overseen. I knew we'd need to pour new, concrete islands but how do you do that and maintain a functioning garage?" asks WinPark Vice President Michael Cramer. "I envisioned a week of lost revenues and a lot of miffed parkers."

CPS offered a solution that was almost impossible to believe. The supplier coordinated the removal of the old system, their steel platforms, and the cashier booths, and then the construction of 11 concrete islands with new 6-foot steel bollards over a three-day weekend. This required a crew of more than 20 laborers and technicians. Forming new islands, installing new bollards, securing new conduit, and pulling cabling for data all happened at the same time. Contract parkers who went home Friday arrived at work the next week to a newly-transformed garage. Workers stayed in lanes for a week to be sure the new equipment functioned properly, and customers were given printed instructions on how to use their new or existing AVI tags in the garage.

"I've never witnessed such a smooth transition from an old system to a completely new configuration that improved flow in the garage for visitor parking and faster, more convenient access control for the monthly parkers," says Audrey Hollingsworth, director of sales and marketing for Winpark.

This site is now the focus of interest for a number of other locations. Finding ways to minimize the effect on operations while offering contract parkers and visitors a pleasurable experience is what parking should be all about. The garage has a new system with a long warranty and the promise of revenue increase. This project demonstrated that taking time to prepare, selecting the right partners, and paying attention to all details can make a garage system transformation go smoothly and minimize the traditional nightmares that every garage manager wants to avoid. **P**



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