IT'S ACADEMIC

By Bryan Townley

An undergraduate planning student takes on a parking study project with surprising results.

During the most recent semester at The Ohio State University, I enrolled in my first city planning studio—one of the capstone classes of the undergraduate planning program. Because these studio classes are arranged in a way that allows students to work directly with municipalities, they function as a hands-on mode of education as well as a team-building exercise.

The studio I joined was tasked with creating a guide that could be used by the leaders of Lancaster, Ohio, to revitalize their struggling downtown. Lancaster, a rural city of 39,000 residents, is located in southeastern Ohio along the border of the Appalachian foothills and the flat farmland of the Midwest. The city faces many of the same problems as others in similar areas: a declining downtown, traffic congestion, economic hardship, and loss of industrial jobs. However, one of Lancaster's biggest problems—one I learned is intertwined with those previously mentioned—is its downtown parking situation.

It became apparent early in the studio process that there was a parking problem in Lancaster. However, after talking with stakeholders, it seemed that everybody had a different definition of what the exact issue was, which made it a controversial and somewhat touchy subject. Some believed there was not enough parking in downtown, while others believed there was an overabundance of parking. Stakeholders advocated for limiting the creation of new parking areas, while others wanted to tear down vacant buildings to create more parking. How could such contradictory perceptions be voiced so aggressively?

Student Involvement

Out of the Lancaster studio group, I was tasked with creating recommendations to remedy the city's parking problem. The first step in the process was to get the facts behind the large difference in perception of what the problem actually was. Aerial imagery of downtown Lancaster shows an extreme amount of surface parking. After visiting the city several times and taking inventory of parking lots, locations, and number of spaces in each lot, it became obvious that most downtown parking was underused. So why did so many believe the downtown area needed more?

EVERYONE CAN'T PARK BY THE FRONT DOOR

By Chad D. Gibson, AICP

In my role as auxiliary faculty in the city and regional planning department at The Ohio State University, I recently oversaw the work of 12 undergraduate students who studied parking in Lancaster, Ohio.

You want to park by the front door. You know you do, but you can't. "What's wrong with this place?" you ask yourself. "Why aren't my specific needs being met? Should I go somewhere else?"

At one time or another, we've all probably had these thoughts, especially when we're in a hurry and our world is the only one that matters just then. But guess what? The world won't end if we have to drive to the end of the second parking row or even the sixth. Not everyone can park by the front door! Retailers have their own acceptable parking ratios and minimum standards. Inner-ring suburbs and mixed-use areas often have maximum parking ratios. So, which approach is correct? As with many divergent opinions, the answer is likely somewhere in the middle.

After a recent major overhaul to a tired shopping center in my town, an ex-zoning board member complained to me, "The parking is terrible!" My response was, "You really couldn't find a parking space?" She said, "Well, sure I could, but it was far away."

That statement told me we got it right. The nasty old half-vacant shopping center had completely turned around and was busy again. In spite of the fact that there were lots of great new stores, restaurants, and a fantastic grocery store, she wasn't able to park by the front door and was angry about it.

Can a parking "problem" really be a good thing? Of course there are extremes, but in most cases I believe the answer is a resounding "yes." A large, successful restaurant with 10 parking spaces and no on-street parking is not what we're talking about, but people certainly do have a wide variation of thoughts as to what constitutes a parking problem. To me, a home improvement store with 650 parking spaces that only uses 100 is a much worse problem than a mixed-use development with some occasional spillover parking onto a side street. Does this issue really come down to a battle between convenience versus pure, unadulterated laziness?

Business—office, really—is the lifeblood of my landlocked, overwhelmingly residential community. The elimination of the estate tax and the local government fund set off a budgetary chain reaction that left one out of every four positions vacant or eradicated since I joined nearly 10 years ago. As a result—and certainly from a political standpoint—the business community typically wins tiebreakers when there are arguments over parking. However, most cities cannot afford vast, open parking lots. Blanket parking ratios such as six per 1,000 square feet for retail just aren't the way to go. A common-sense approach that uses real data from other businesses of the same nature must be employed to determine the right number. It is up to planners and business owners/developers to collaborate in good faith to get the best ratio for a given location. There have to be real efforts made on all sides to set aside historically bad and stubborn tendencies or move beyond some number buried in a zoning code book. Build shared parking options into a site plan. Insert a valid legal trigger for off-site employee parking and valet parking requirements as needed. Take the time to visit other locations at various times to get a better feel for what works and what doesn't.

The downtowns of many cities across the country are suffering with a perceived parking problem. However, when we look at aerial photos of the same downtowns, vacant surface parking lots are likely a dominant feature. The possessive feelings of business owners toward their private parking lots is understandable. Safe, convenient customer parking is a critical piece of the development puzzle, but it is necessary for business owners to look at the big picture and see that once the word gets out that an area is difficult to navigate, everyone will suffer. These parking areas go vastly unused, leading to sprawl, weak city centers, and higher vacancy rates. Overblown fears of lawsuits over shared parking lots must be moderated. All parties must be willing to cooperate and achieve a reasonable, practical solution.

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The answer lies in the types of parking in downtown Lancaster: on-street public, off-street public, and off-street private. Through observations of Lancaster's parking inventory, I determined that there was a large difference in numbers of public and private parking spaces. This was backed up by a recent parking study conducted in Lancaster that found that 78 percent of all downtown Lancaster's parking—and 97 percent of downtown's off-street spaces—is private. These private lots often have restrictions in place that do not allow visitors to park unless they are patronizing attached businesses. Sometimes, this restriction even prohibits going to another business after visiting the shop that owns the lot. Further restrictions limit lot access for those who are not business employees, as workers can purchase permits and tags to display in their vehicles.

The most visible and convenient downtown parking for visitors is on-street parallel parking. Consequently, , being the most convenient, these spaces are also the most used. If spaces are not available in front of a desired business, downtown visitors must look to off-street parking. Due to there being a much larger percentage of off-street private parking, visitors have few public-parking options. In fact, there are only 56 off-street public parking spaces in downtown Lancaster. This is where the parking problem begins: visitors see all available off and on-street public parking as full, and the only empty parking areas they can find are private. These private restrictions and the time it takes to find adequate parking deter visitors from the downtown area, leading to the perception that there is not enough parking downtown.

The recent parking study also stated that the overall weekday parking occupancy was recorded at 57 percent, which includes those private parking lots throughout downtown, many of which have plenty of space available. This is how certain stakeholders justified the perception that there is an overabundance of parking in Lancaster and why both perceptions—that there is too much and too little parking—are correct. The overarching problem with parking in downtown Lancaster is its overabundance of private parking and lack of public parking.

Required Ratios

The city ordinance states that businesses must provide a certain number of parking spaces based on their square footage; this is what led to the creation of the private lots throughout downtown. The code would probably make more sense in a suburban setting, but it hurts the downtown. Private parking restrictions limit the businesses that visitors can frequent, forcing them to drive

from business to business, even when they are only a block apart. If no off-street public parking is provided, on-street parking is always the first to fill, leading to the perception of inadequate parking and deterring potential customers. This kind of code also threatens the walkability of a downtown; forcing people to drive short distances rather than walk creates unnecessary traffic congestion, which further discourages walking. A downtown is supposed to be the most walkable portion of a city; this is not the case in Lancaster

Recommendations

In the guide created by our studio group, I made several recommendations to the City of Lancaster:

- Designate a centrally located and easily accessed public parking lot in downtown. This lot will create a more inviting atmosphere for visitors who currently become frustrated in the search for adequate parking. This lot also encourages visitors to frequent multiple shops during their time downtown, instead of restricting them from doing so.
- Employ a park-and-walk slogan that emphasizes the ease of only having to park once to be able to visit any and all businesses in downtown. Visible, easy-to-read wayfinding is key to promoting public parking, as it is the first thing drivers look for upon arriving in downtown.
- Loosen the city's minimum parking requirements downtown. This will help reduce the development of unnecessary private parking lots.
- Create a code that allows for shared parking between businesses based on their peak hours of operation. Lancaster is very much a nine-to-five city, and stakeholders greatly expressed their desire for more night entertainment options in downtown. I recommended that the city allow lots owned by daytime businesses to be shared by those open at night. This would relax the need for more private parking, while helping to attract desired nighttime businesses to downtown Lancaster.

Throughout the Lancaster studio process I realized that parking is much more complex than it appears. Parking seems to be a constant balancing act between too much and too little, with both sides having the potential to deter both businesses and visitors and causing the paradoxical effect of having both too much and too little parking simultaneously. I have learned that the wrong type of parking can create compounding problems, while the correct type has the potential to be a catalyst for future success in a city. I hope the latter will prove true for Lancaster.   ℗
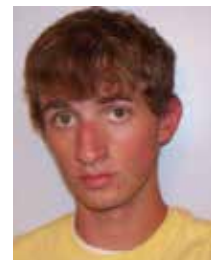
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