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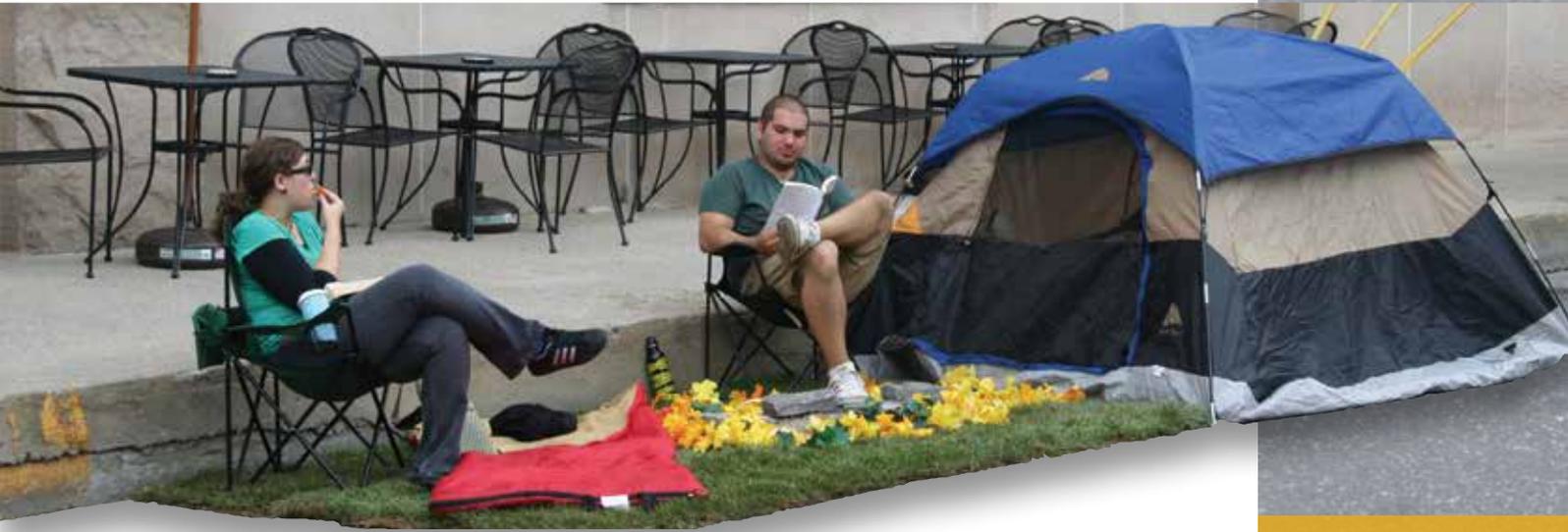
Park(ing) Day transforms on-street parking spaces into parks for one day each year, and city parking departments are embracing it.

By Kim Fernandez

Midway through an otherwise ordinary day three years ago, Jeff Petry picked up the phone to hear the voice of a seriously stymied parking enforcement officer.

"He said we had people sitting in parking spaces outside Starbucks and other downtown businesses," says Petry, parking manager at the City of Eugene, Ore. "They'd paid the meters and they had chairs and were sitting there. My officers wanted to know what to do."

With that, Petry and his staff were introduced to Park(ing) Day. Launched by San Francisco art and design studio Rebar in 2005, Park(ing) Day encourages organizations, governments, businesses, and individual citizens to re-think parking spaces one day a year and (legally) transform them into mini-parks, art exhibits, exercise spaces, and other things that have nothing to do with cars.

Rebar says Park(ing) Day was developed to help people think about new ways to approach urban infrastructure, and that's accomplished once a year—Park(ing) Day 2013 is scheduled for Friday, Sept. 20.

For parking professionals in municipalities, on university campuses, and other places where the day has caught on, confusion has morphed into everything from good-humored tolerance to all-out participation.

"My biggest concern was for their safety," Petry says of his first group of Park(ing) Day participants. He left his office and headed to Starbucks to see what was going on, and found a few spaces transformed into parklets. All the meters had been fed, though, and everyone seemed to be taking precautions, so Petry said hello and told his officers to let the people be.

"I thought it was cool," he says.

Growing Participation

Since its launch with one parking space in San Francisco, Park(ing) Day has attracted the attention of nonprofit organizations, artists, community groups, and even businesses, who've all started participating with their own one-space-big exhibits. Rebar says that in 2011 (the latest year for which numbers are available), 975 parks

were erected in 162 cities and 35 different countries. They range from the elaborate to the super-simple.

"One of our spaces was taken by a group of women who put sod grass in a space and sat there, drank coffee, and enjoyed the sunshine," says Petry.

Louisville, Ky., hosted 26 parklets in 2012; Isaiah Mouw, CAPP, general manager, Republic Parking System, visited about 20 during the course of the day. "There were a lot of interactive parks with activities or games, along with representatives to talk with you," he says. "One parklet allowed people to paint doors bright colors, and the doors were used to replace boarded-up doorways on abandoned houses." Another parklet hosted a mini-mini-golf course and invited children to come play.

Dallas saw 42 groups participate in more than 50 parking spaces last year, says city Park(ing) Day co-organizer Noah Jeppson, who's an environmental graphic designer. "The first year, we had participation from a few architectural firms and some city departments," he says, adding that in 2011—Dallas' first year of Park(ing) Day—there were 35 participants. "As word got out, more

people wanted to get involved and they started having really creative ideas."

Spaces in the city are coordinated by Downtown Dallas, Inc., which secures sponsorships from local businesses and issues free permits to participants. Jeppson says last year's day saw a wide variety of installations.

"We had a yoga studio where people could do yoga," he says. "A couple turned one space into a dog park. A lot of universities participated, and they turned spaces into art or seating installations. One space was used to give manicures and pedicures, one gave out snow cones, and we had a dance stage in one and a remote-control car racetrack in another. It's really nice to see such a variety of people with different ideas."

Along with the individual space exhibitions, Dallas'

Park(ing) Day includes stages set up where local performers play music.

Similar events take place in Long Beach, Calif., on Park(ing) Day. That city's first participation happened in 2009, when a local design firm laid artificial turf in a single space and complemented it with a tree and a bench. The city got involved in 2011, offering no-parking permits to those who wanted to participate.

"We decided to encourage participation rather than discourage it," says Tiffany Chen, sustainability analyst, City of Long Beach Office of Sustainability. "We made it really easy in 2012 and asked people to sign up online if they planned to register, and then we registered them into the worldwide Park(ing) Day map."

The map, hosted at parkingday.org, pinpoints every registered participant in the world, letting interested residents plan to visit Park(ing) Day installations when they happen and keeping track of who's participating and where.

"We have bicycle advocacy groups who give bicycle tours of Park(ing) Day," says Chen. "They take people to visit all the Park(ing) Day spots in the city. It turns into this day of activities and celebrations."

Why Participate

Petry admits even he was caught off-guard when he got that first phone call from an officer about people sitting in chairs in a parking space three years ago. "The police had questions," he says. "There was something going on here. They had to make sure public order was kept and people were safe, and then there were questions about things like dirt runoff from sod in parking spaces and what that meant for stormwater. And parking enforcement officers didn't know what to do because there were supposed to be cars parked there!"

Businesses, also, complained a bit that first year, but soon realized their own benefits from the event. "People bought a lot of food and beverages," says Petry. And there's another benefit as well: "When you have happy, smiling people in front of your business doing something unique, you get your picture in the paper."

"We tell people they need to follow city ordinances," says Chen. "If there's a spot you didn't get a permit for, you need to feed the meters and talk with the people in the businesses there. Honestly, after the first year, our businesses saw that this draws people in. They turned a new leaf and started participating instead of being upset."

Last year, she says, a bookstore transformed a parking space into a library, and people were invited to sit in chairs and at tables to read for a while. "It drew people inside to purchase books," says Chen.

Park(ing) Day in Long Beach is a limited-time event: permits run from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., 2 p.m. to 5 p.m., and 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. "This isn't a whole-day kind of thing," says Chen. Other cities have similar setups; in Dallas, the day runs from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m., which is just long enough for both city workers and residents to participate.

And while the idea seemed weird at first, even hesitant

city officials have embraced the concept. "It's become something like Earth Day," says Chen. "We embraced the mission of urban open space and being able to call to the public's attention how space is allocated and how we can improve the quality of life and the walkability of our community."

Jeppson agrees. "The city didn't know how to respond the first year," he says. "We had to have barricades around every space and there were off-duty police officers on every corner. The city was afraid cars would go flying into the spaces. They're used to festivals that close streets temporarily, but this was different—we're demonstrating what can happen in this one small space. It's getting easier and easier as we go along."

He says the benefits are worth the work. "It brings

people together," he says. "There are people who live in the city who may not interact with businesses. And the people who work there may only get out to walk to lunch. These parklets and Park(ing) Day force them to think about the city and the life that's there. People who don't see the city as a liveable area can see some of these events and activities, and they transform city life."

"This shifts how people think space is used in an urban environment," says Chen. "In Long Beach, there isn't a lot of space. Parking spots are a huge commodity here. But what about spots for people? There aren't many parks downtown, either. If we can create temporary installations or gathering spaces for people, it brings the community together in a different way."

And it's very little work for her office, she says. "Generally, the most work we do is plan our own parklet," she says. "We put the information out there and think about how we'll participate. But the community takes this on itself."

Petry agrees, saying that even the first year, he saw no reason to discourage the day. "From my perspective, they were safe and it was unique. There were no real issues to deal with," he says. And it's a great opportunity to bring the community together and make parking part of the fun.

"The worst thing you can do is crack down on something that should be a unique, fun experience for your community," he says. "What's the difference between a downtown and a suburban mall? You have creative, unique things going on in your downtown. One of those things is Park(ing) Day."

For more information on Park(ing) Day 2013, visit parkingday.org. ℗

Participating in Park(ing) Day on Sept. 20? Submit photos from your city or college to **fernandez@ parking.org** and we will run them in a future issue.

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