

# BEYOND JUST **P**ARKING

Parking professionals in Fort Lee, N.J., take on many diverse roles, becoming integral parts of their community.

**By Gloria Gallo, CAPP, and Patricia Rumi, CAPP**

**F**or many years, the four-square-mile Borough of Fort Lee, N.J., has made clever use of its parking authority. To keep taxes down and offer residents increased services, the municipal government has called upon the department from time to time to assume responsibility of some unusual tasks. As a result, in addition to the role of managing parking in town, the authority has expanded its role to broaden community involvement. Expanding the agency's duties beyond parking has been an experience in adaptability and resilience that has offered enormous benefits to the town and its residents.

With heightened traffic congestion around the George Washington Bridge into New York City and a recent increase in vehicle traffic through the streets of Fort Lee, the municipal government felt an obligation to the community to come up with a system to help residents get into and out of town during peak hours with the least amount of interruption to already-busy schedules. A few years ago, the borough introduced a shuttle bus program that picks up residents inside town limits and transports them to the nearest ferry landing. There are three key reasons residents like and use the program: the service is free, commuters can leave their vehicles at home, and there are no parking issues or fees at the ferry landing. The shuttle program is very successful and

the borough is in the process of implementing a second route to accommodate other areas of town.

In addition to this innovative program, the parking authority entered into an agreement with a nearby town to pick up its residents (not just Fort Lee citizens) along the route as well. Expanding beyond immediate residents encourages more people to join the effort to relieve congestion in the area. This is a win-win situation for all. Because Fort Lee is currently in the midst of developing a large parcel that will include two high-rise condominium buildings, a local theater, museum, retail, promenade, and green space, the parking authority anticipates implementing a third commuter bus route to the ferry landing.

## Keeping Traffic Moving

Although managing and providing available parking is the main objective of the parking authority, the department is instrumental in keeping all traffic moving smoothly throughout the town, which helps provide public access to metered street parking and commuter lots. Fort Lee is affected by any and all incidents on the massive George Washington Bridge and its access roads. At times, the borough can become totally gridlocked, which prevents commuters from getting to parking lots and keeps buses from completing scheduled routes on time. This, of course, cannot always be avoided, but providing alternate transportation for residents has proven quite beneficial. Fewer cars on the road means less congestion when there's a problem in traffic.

The ferry shuttle joined an extensive bus program provided to the senior population when it launched. The senior bus has run for about 30 years and made its debut when very few towns provided such a service to older residents. This program has been extremely successful and exhibited constant growth, and Fort Lee seniors rely on it to get around.

The senior bus offers daily transportation to the local nutrition center and supermarkets, weekly trips to the shopping mall, non-emergency medical transportation service three days a week, and a Saturday schedule to several destinations. The parking authority has a fleet of six buses and is responsible for scheduled routes, drivers, maintenance of vehicles, and administration. Many of the vehicles are handicapped-accessible and used frequently for medical transport. In addition, the borough offers a daily bus shuttle for non-seniors.

Most of Fort Lee's shuttle vehicles are obtained through grants submitted by the parking authority, along with donations the municipal governing body negotiates with local agencies. At press time, the parking authority expects delivery of two minivans for medical transport and one mini-bus to replace its older vehicles—all paid for with grants. There are also two buses on their way to Fort Lee that were donated by the port authority to accommodate the second ferry shuttle.

## Beyond Parking

The Fort Lee parking authority is an integral part of all borough services, including some not traditionally associated with parking. The authority is a member of the local emergency management team, which means its professionals assist when transportation is needed for evacuations during emergencies; they also provide transportation to alternate housing or relief centers. In addition, they may provide personnel and/or equipment

to assist the department of public works during emergency situations.

Because authority professionals work with seniors every day, they organize and run an annual senior picnic for about 500 people in the town's high school parking lot. All parking authority employees pitch in to make this a success every year.

Many years ago, Fort Lee's governing body requested the parking authority devise a paint program to help with infrastructure upkeep. This program involves hiring local high school students during the summer to paint yellow curbs and handicapped spaces, clean debris, and control weeds in town parking lots. The paint program allows the town's regular maintenance crew to concentrate on other things while offering workforce experience for young adults.

There's been another benefit to this program: growing the future town workforce. Many students return as



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seasonal employees year after year until they graduate, and some stay on until they complete college. It's not uncommon for the parking authority to then hire these seasonal workers as full-time employees; several have become police officers, public works employees, and building code officials.

### **Back to Basics**

So, does the parking authority regulate parking and write summonses in Fort Lee? Absolutely. While it takes on many other responsibilities as well, the department still manages and operates several parking lots, maintains hundreds of street meters and numerous kiosks, installs and maintains signage, and operates a residential parking program that is effective and vital to the town. Because it is so close to New York City, town parking regulations are strictly enforced to keep vehicles from parking on residential streets without permits. This works well with its shuttles, which allow residents to keep their vehicles off the road during peak hours, softening effects on local traffic.

Through the years, Fort Lee's parking officials have not only had to be knowledgeable about the parking industry, but also versatile in their responsibilities, personalities, and the cooperation and willingness to be part of all aspects of our community. Most authorities do not operate in such a diverse role, but Fort Lee professionals see the value in being innovative, particularly while navigating the maze of future growth. Attending conferences and workshops has been invaluable in providing awareness of all new trends in the parking industry. Although Fort Lee's parking authority is small in comparison to many other parking departments, its professionals assume diverse responsibilities, interact with the public in many different ways, and contribute in a big way to the quality of life for its residents.

The continued support of the mayor, council, and board of commissioners has been a crucial component in accomplishing many goals. The relationship between the parking authority, borough officials, department heads, local businesses, and organizations is another necessary ingredient toward reaching maximum achievements. 

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