

GREENING BEFORE DESIGN

By Brett Wood, CAPP

Parking’s green movement has largely focused on the facility: How can we squeeze out the most energy efficiency through lighting, operations, and design? I have seen numerous presentations and publications documenting power savings, cost savings, and innovations in interior and exterior design that highlight and promote Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification, Green Parking Council (GPC), certification, and overall improvements to the parking environment and experience.

As a recent member of IPI’s Awards of Excellence committee, I have also seen firsthand some of the most innovative approaches to sustainability in parking. But the question I always ask myself is, “Are we truly starting from the origin when it comes to sustainability in our parking decisions?”

The true intent of sustainability in the transportation and parking realm is a little nebulous. In researching for this column, I found the following definition from the University of Plymouth Centre for Sustainable Transport:

A sustainable transportation system is one that:

- Allows the basic access needs of individuals and societies to be met safely and in a manner consistent with human and ecosystem health, and with equity within and between generations.
- Is affordable, operates efficiently, offers choice of transport mode, and supports a vibrant economy.
- Limits emissions and waste within the planet’s ability to absorb them, minimizes consumption of non-renewable resources to the sustainable yield level, reuses and recycles its components, and minimizes the use of land and the production of noise.

While the first two components of the definition certainly apply to the work being done to promote sustainability in parking today, the last one hones in on a topic that could provide greater depth in the greening movement. Green design certainly minimizes consumption of renewable goods, but the minimization of vehicle miles traveled or more specifically, vehicles, might be the most appropriate method for limiting emissions and waste. That’s where the concepts of right-sized parking come in to play.

Right-Sizing

The concepts of right-sized parking include localizing parking requirements to meet actual demand characteristics. For so long, municipal planners and decision makers have leaned on antiquated parking planning variables, many of which are holdovers from suburban

development standards, that lead to an unnecessary overbuilding of parking spaces in our downtowns. Research in progressive communities has shown that this overbuilding of parking supply can lead to increased vehicle ownership, more vehicle miles traveled, higher traffic congestion, and increased housing costs. Consider it the “Field of Dreams” theory—if you build it, they will drive.

By over-providing parking, we incentivize our residents to drive and may discourage effective transit services and good urban design policies. Parking demand management decisions can have tremendous effects on the ability of our downtowns to progress, including:

- Encouraging alternative transportation measures.
- Promoting more park-once design.
- Reducing vehicle miles traveled (and associated congestion and pollution).
- Promoting transit-oriented design.
- Improving density and walkability.
- Reducing housing and development costs.

The centerpiece of a good right-sized parking program is locally-cultivated data that relates actual parking behaviors and uses to planning ordinances and zoning code. This is typically realized in the form of reduced (or removed) parking minimums and implementing parking maximums. Cities need to educate developers and residents about the benefits of the program. And the program must be coupled with an effective shared parking program, allowing employees, residents, and visitors access to centralized shared parking facilities that serve a number of uses. Finally, parking pricing and management strategies should follow suit, promoting an environment that de-incentivizes an overabundance of vehicular travel through appropriately balanced rates and demand allocation.

It’s time we as parking professionals embraced the notion that we don’t have to park every car. In fact, we want some of them to go away, leading to a more sustainable transportation system overall. **P**



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