



# WARM and FUZZY PARKING

How one parking authority stayed on task while working

By Jeff Petry

**C**AN A MUNICIPAL PARKING PROGRAM be thought of as warm and fuzzy and still deliver necessary parking services? In Eugene, Ore., we have been on a five-year journey to create a municipal parking service that reflects our community's values. Our progress toward this goal was recently noted through an unlikely source: a local newspaper editorial piece.

The author of a weekly column is a member of an architects association that held its regional association picnic on top of a parking garage. The author noted that holding an event on top of a parking garage is not the typical day-to-day business of municipal parking, but the fact that it happened reflected a government working with the community without delving into needless bureaucracy. So how does a parking program earn such kudos in the media? We did it through a lot of little steps that add up over time.



## to reflect its community's values and soften its image.

### Take a Small Business Approach

In Oregon, public parking services can be handled through administrative action, including citation adjudication. We recognize that enforcement, adjudication, off-street parking management, and on-street meters and time zones can be wholly contracted out and performed by the private sector. By doing that, we run our parking program like a small business that focuses on our customers. We understand that we operate on behalf of our community, and we look for the added value of public employees performing the parking service.

### Thousands of Daily Customers

How many businesses have thousands of daily customer interactions that determine their perception in the community? Parking does.

A rough calculation of our municipal parking program, which includes eight downtown parking structures with 3,000 stalls; 1,000 downtown on-street spaces; 650 on-street spaces around the University of Oregon campus; some 5,000 residential parking zone spaces, and jurisdiction over enforcement throughout the city, shows that our program has more than 1 million parking interactions each year. As such, our goal is for our community members and their visitors

to have a wonderful experience and want to return and recommend us to their friends. This guides how we enforce and present ourselves.

### Goal: Zero Tickets

In 2008, I heard a talk from John Shaheen, then at Washington State University, about how he purposely reduced the number of parking tickets issued on campus by changing the university's parking infrastructure to create fewer ticket opportunities. What a great idea!

We adopted this goal in Eugene because issuing a ticket never creates a positive customer interaction, and the process of enforcement through adjudication is very expensive. Since 1991, our service delivery area has doubled, but the number of parking citations issued has been cut in half. While parking tickets are still written, we look for issues that may create parking conflicts and mitigate them to encourage a better and easier overall parking experience.

### Names and Looks Matter

We removed the word "enforcement" from our parking program last summer. We also stopped using the term "enforcement officers" and embraced "parking services officers" and



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“parking services technicians.” Our focus is service, not enforcement, and our new job titles better reflect that.

We also re-imaged our parking officers. Instead of dressing them to look like law enforcement, we went for a friendlier, resort-wear uniform. Our officers wear light blue shirts with badges on their belts instead of their chests, and they sport casual name tags. Within days of switching out what officers wear, one received a hug from a community member in appreciation for his help.

#### **Customer Contact Cards**

Our parking enforcement team created business cards that are placed on windshields. The cards include a checkbox list of items, such as parking too far from the curb, not displaying a monthly permit correctly, or other frequent parking issues. They also offer an officer’s contact information and ask the driver to give the officer a call. Depending on policy, it may be in addition to a citation or not. The customer contact card provides a gentler path to better parking.

#### **Block Parties**

Each summer, our residential parking zoned neighborhoods hold a block party, and we send our parking team out with our parking lemonade stand (see the January 2013 issue of *The Parking Professional*). The stand offers an opportunity to talk with residents and sell our annual residential parking permits. Residents appreciate the ability to talk to us and the ease of picking up their annual permits. It also helps promote the event!

#### **Students Are our Future**

We recognize that a parking ticket may play a small role

in long-term decisions made by the tens of thousands of students passing through our community’s universities and colleges. We want parking to be part of the reason Eugene is a cool place to start their next company or move back to later in life. Therefore, we don’t target students for tickets and meter revenue, but use a parking ticket as a simple lesson in life responsibilities. We personalize the parking experience with our students to build a better community in the long run.

#### **Housing Fair**

Each spring, the University of Oregon invites off-campus housing property managers to set up in a vendor hall so students can learn about their housing options. The city’s parking program sets up a booth to help educate students about their on-street parking options, parking on front lawns, and general questions about living off campus.

We attend the fair because there are a limited number of on-street residential parking permits available and students are not aware of the limitations. When they ask their prospective landlords about parking, they are often told that the city will give them permits, but then arrive in the fall to find permits are already sold out. What a horrible message for me to deliver when they are so excited to start a new year.

We use the housing fair, as well as other communications, to get the message out to students planning to live off campus the following year.

#### **The Art of Parking**


Eugene’s home-grown parking and public art program has been featured in local and national media, including *The Parking Professional*. The key to our successful art



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### Micro-Solutions

We work with customers to find solutions to their parking pinch points on a daily basis. A downtown business wants to hang a sign reading, “Customer Parking, Next Left” on a city light pole to help direct its customers to a few designated spaces in a private parking lot? We will work with the city traffic engineer to develop a pilot program to do it. A furniture store receives custom-ordered pieces once per month via semi-trailer but has no options to park the semi and unload? We work with the city traffic engineer to develop a temporary traffic control plan to enable their deliveries.

Always bear in mind that parking programs exist to enable commerce, not create roadblocks.

### Town and Gown and Parking

The City of Eugene and the University of Oregon parking programs work closely together to address any parking issues in neighborhoods around the campus. We are working on sharing our resources, such as the city contracting with the university to sell residential parking permits for the neighborhoods around campus in their parking office.

We regularly attend neighborhood meetings together. We continue to look for opportunities to bring our programs together in the interest of our customers.

Our program’s goals are to encourage and enhance economic activity. We are fortunate to manage off-street parking, on-street space, and enforcement. As a result, we are able to assist downtown development activity both in the short and long term. We are able to meet with neighbors in residential areas to assist with their specific issues. Our enforcement team acts as the welcoming committee for thousands of visitors every day, and our administrative staff talks or meets with concerned customers every day.

On Valentine’s Day this year, a parking services officer was performing his normal duties downtown. A citation was issued for an expired meter. A group of young men, dressed in suits, came running up to him right after the ticket was issued. He educated them on the parking rules and pulled the ticket. The group was so thankful they asked if they could sing him a song, as they were a performance group. They did, and an interaction with a customer-oriented parking program resulted in an impromptu music performance on the street!

Can a parking program be warm and fuzzy and make your community better? It absolutely can! **P**



program is partnerships with local artists that allowed them to incorporate our parking assets into their art.

We have poetry and stories in our stairwells, yarn bombs on our meters, zombie signs on metal gates, student designed and manufactured bike corrals, painted multi-space meters, and digital light art events on top of parking garages. It has been piecemeal development but adds to a creative and distinct downtown Eugene!

### Poetry in Motion

On the first day of each month, we create a poem that can be left on customers’ windshields reminding them to display their new permit if we see the previous month’s permit displayed. The poems are not perfect (or even that poetic!), but they are fun and we’ve heard that some customers now purposely withhold their permits to get the new poem each month!



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