AN INVALUABLE RESOURCE

As CPARK-L celebrates 21 years, its founder looks back at its history and ahead to the future.

By Douglas Holmes, CAPP

Long before we all embraced Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, Skype, LinkedIn, Instagram, Flickr, the World Wide Web, or even Google, there was CPARK-L, a parking-specific email list. CPARK-L was created out of my selfish desire to obtain information to help me do my job but also to serve the campus parking management community. Since then, the list has withstood the test of technological times—it turned 21 years old a few weeks ago.

CPARK-L is an Internet list that is very simple in concept and very useful in practice. Basically, like all Internet lists, it is a glorified remailer. People subscribe to the list and post questions, and CPARK-L mails the queries out automatically to all subscribers.

CPARK-L creates a roundtable discussion with your peers at any time of the day, whenever you want, on any subject relating to parking and transit. The list links you to any subscriber in the world. You will recognize names that are already subscribed as you read their postings to the list. CPARK-L can bring ideas to you from around the country and from around the world and offer you the ability to provide information to your peers.

The Birth of the List

The idea for CPARK-L was hatched when I was notified by my then-vice-president that my operation was not running lean enough and that most campuses across the country had much lower overhead costs than ours. I had no way to check the accuracy of the comment and spent days on the phone contacting similar universities, trying to get benchmark information and, if we were indeed fatter, to solicit ways to trim things up.

After a couple weeks, I had my answers and was able to write a report and action plan to satisfy the VP's concern. Fortunately, we compared quite favorably to peer institutions. The problem was that the research effort was labor-intensive, and I wanted a way to at least help speed up information-gathering without engaging in unnecessary games of phone tag.

A couple weeks later at a meeting on campus, I explained my challenge to my colleague, Pete Weiss. Pete worked in the university's computer system and is a technical genius. After an explanation of just what an Internet list was, we decided to create CPARK-L. It was a way for me to quickly garner information, help, tips, and advice from campus parking managers. Pete is no longer fully active on CPARK-L, but I still seek out his knowledge from time to time. I act as the editor of the list.

The reason I say "campus parking managers" is quite simple. Back when we kicked the list off, Internet access was common on campuses but not in corporate or governmental America. (Anyone remember Gopher?) However, as the Internet expanded its reach, the list's subscriber base grew in other sectors of the profession. Municipalities and other governmental agencies that dealt with parking began using it, as did medical centers, mass transportation authorities, and entertainment venues.

Subscribers were slow in coming at first. However, as word spread at regional conferences, by word of mouth, and through the International Parking Institute (IPI), the number of subscribers grew quickly. Today, there are more than 1,200 subscribers from countries all over the world, including Australia, Canada, Cocos Islands, Israel, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the U.S.

The Value
There are several factors that make CPARK-L such a handy tool. First, and foremost, it is free. It does not cost anything to subscribe, maintain your subscription, or have access to the archives. All you need is an Internet connection. There are no advertisements or pop-ups. The database is not provided to vendors, although there are many vendor subscribers (they are not allowed to post advertisements, but many provide solid non-promotional response to technical questions).

The value to vendors is that they can see market trends developing through the various discussion threads that make their way to CPARK-L. They also get valuable insight into the kinds of

products that parking professionals need or want to make their operations more efficient.

CPARK-L can serve as a recruitment tool for employers looking for quality parking professionals. Organizations have reached out to the subscriber base to find parking managers, alternative transportation managers, transit managers, and other specialized disciplines that are needed to ensure the smooth operation of a quality parking/transportation system. As parking continues to diversify and become integrated with transit operations, CPARK-L can help serve as a clearinghouse for information as the world evolves.

CPARK-L has also been used by state and regional parking associations to announce their upcoming educational programs and trade shows.

CPARK-L has a searchable archive that can look back three years. A web interface makes the archives easy to access. Topics are wide-ranging, from permit distribution systems to cash-handling procedures, from bicycle sharing programs to ride sharing to carpools to vanpools. In January, for example, there were requests for information on consultant selection, enforcement technology,

and public safety as it relates to a parking system. In December 2014, there were 32 different discussion threads; six job postings in municipal and academic settings; and threads dealing with bikes, (bicycle lockers and bicycle enforcement), campus shuttle operations, carpool permits, lighting issues, requests for sample RFPs on various items, and requests for help on how to deal with students called up for active military duty.

Using the List

Using CPARK-L is pretty simple. To subscribe, visit lists.cac.psu.edu/cgi-bin/wa?SUBED1=CPARK-L&A=1.

Follow the prompts, and you are done. You will get a confirmation note in your email in a short period of time. You will also be provided with instructions on how to use the system, including how to obtain a self-assigned password that you'll need to search the archives.

To post to the list, simply send an email to CPARK-L@lists.psu.edu.

It is important to include a significant descriptive heading in the subject line. Your posting will be stored for three years and accessible in the CPARK-L archive. Archive searches rely on the subject line and return an indexed list of messages with matching keywords. Additionally, it is helpful to have a signature block (plain text, of course) that lists your contact information. Subscribers may need clarification on your query to provide a complete answer or suggestion.

Sometimes traffic on the list can get very high, especially when a sensitive subject or one that has wide interest, such as EV charging stations and their operation, is touched upon. If you are getting too many emails, you can select digest mode in your subscription options. This mode provides you with one email a day that contains an indexed listing of the subjects and a link to the string of emails that fall under that topic. It's easy to scan the list of subjects for that day and click on the topics that interest you.

Things to Know

There are a few rules and things to remember. Corresponding through CPARK-L is very personal. You get the distinct feeling that you are speaking directly to a colleague, but you are not—you are in an auditorium with more than 1,200 parking professionals listening. Anything you post to the list will, theoretically, go to all 1,200 subscribers and be stored in the archives for three years.

Due to a desire to conserve as much server space for the archives, thank-yous and me-toos are not allowed. If you post a query to the list, it is customary to share the information you gather back to the list. This is espe-

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cially true if you post a short survey, such as a question to the list. Many subscribers will send an email back to you directly and bypass the list, so it is incumbent upon you to summarize and post the findings you receive. If you want to send a thanks or general agreement, send it but send it directly to the individual, not to the list.

Beware the reply key. Depending how your email is configured, when you hit the reply key, you may automatically address your outgoing reply to the whole list. This can be painful and/or humorous all at once. Several years ago, a subscriber was greatly irritated at their child's day care provider. By an inadvertent use of the reply key, a lengthy rant about day care was opened and read by hundreds of gleeful subscribers. It could have been much worse.

The list uses very simple technology that cannot handle attachments. Take a moment to review your signature block; they often contain graphics such as the city crest or the university mark that will be viewed as attachments and block the posting of your message. On the plus side, attachments are frequently virus vectors, and it is extremely difficult to accidentally download a virus through CPARK-L.

CPARK-L can deal well with hyperlinks to the web. Many times, survey data can be resubmitted to the list via a link to a site. As always, be careful opening attachments from anyone. It is possible that someone could put a link to an infected website onto their posting to CPARK-L.

Internet lists prefer plain text. Plain text is the most universal of all text formats and is usually easily read by email servers. It does not like rich text formats such as HTML or text that contains embedded formatting codes.

Many subscribers of CPARK-L are also members of IPI, and many have earned their CAPP certifications. On the other hand, some have little experience in the profession and are trying to broaden their horizons and create a network of experience to help them succeed. And there are a large number of subscribers with many years (some painful) of experience in the wonderful world of parking.

CPARK-L can be a very powerful research tool. It can be used to refute claims made against your organization or substantiate them. It can be used to garner information on best practices and on what may work in certain situations and not in others. CPARK-L can be used to identify vendors, contractors, consultants, and potential employees.

I hope you subscribe and that you find this list as useful as the rest of us have during the last 21 years. Personally, I am going to take the editor (me) out for a beer and celebrate this momentous birthday. **ⓟ**