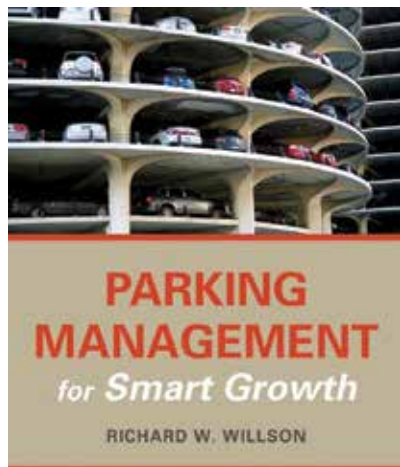


PARKING MANAGEMENT FOR SMART GROWTH

*Author, professor, and consultant
Rick Willson on his new book
and future vision for parking.*

Rick Willson's new book, *Parking Management for Smart Growth*, is a how-to guide on strategic management of parking to let communities better use existing resources and avoid overbuilding. It covers strategies from shared parking arrangements and digital tools that make the most of every space and includes case studies of successful parking strategies that have made a positive difference in communities around the world.

The book, says Willson, was a natural outgrowth of his first, *Parking Reform Made Easy*, which met great reviews when it was published in 2013. It introduces readers to the reasons behind smart parking, explains the purpose of parking requirements, explores land management reform, and explains parking theory and purpose to planners, many of whom have little education in the industry.



Willson is a professor in and chair of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. He's conducted extensive research in transportation planning, parking policy, the implications of communicative action theory in transportation planning, and transportation demand management, among other areas. His research is frequently published in scholarly journals, and he consults with agencies that include the Bay Area Rapid Transit District. He holds a PhD in urban planning from the University of California, Los Angeles, and a master's degree from the University of Southern California. He recently talked with *The Parking Professional* about parking planning, the future of the industry, and his new book.



The Parking Professional: This book feels like a how-to on parking planning for communities that have never done it. What was your motivation for writing it?

RICK WILLSON: Todd Litman wrote his *Parking Management Best Practices*, but no one had written a book on parking requirements and reform. This book has a lot mixed into it. I've been doing parking studies for decades as a consultant and I really wanted this book to be helpful to people—here's how you do it. When a city hires a consultant to do a parking management study, they can use the book as a guide to what's coming and what ideally could be done.

My first book, *Parking Reform Made Easy*, was targeted to local

Another approach is more direct. In the City of San Clemente, Calif., the city approached private property owners and asked to enter into a short-term lease with them to share their parking at night. The city promised to take care of enforcement and they found property owners who were very willing to do that. It gave the property owners some revenue and costs much less than building a new structure in the downtown.

Creating economic incentive is part of it, but there's also a people part of it. In most areas, there's no one charged with negotiating shared parking agreements. Individual parking owners can do it if they're inclined, but there's no one whose job it is to go out and broker such agreements. The business improvement district can do it, but

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planners who write zoning code. This one has a broader audience. It includes planners, obviously, but as we all know, parking management is sort of strewn across departments in a lot of cases. Many departments have a hand in it, so they're an audience, but it's also for business improvement districts, community groups that have parking issues, and anybody who's facing a challenge or is dissatisfied with their parking situation.

My main motivation for writing it was that in my opinion, we have too many parking spaces for every car. There's an opportunity to use parking more effectively so scarce land in our cities can be used for other purposes. Looking to the future, we see trends in technology that will help, and we see social preferences that suggest vehicle ownership per household will decline. We're entering this new era where what's important is being able to access services rather than owning a car, not necessarily in the suburbs, but in cities and urban places. I think there's going to be a reduction in the number of cars per person or per household.

We have an opportunity to repurpose parking for other things, but we need a process to manage that. Cities are able to reduce their parking on paper, but they have to have parking management to make sure the parking works so that customers are satisfied, shared parking is working well, and there are information services so people feel like it's just as convenient to park, even though the total number of spaces has decreased.

TPP: The book talks a lot about shared parking, where, say, a bank's lot is used for restaurant parking at night. How do we convince parking owners that this can work?

RW: The problem I find is that in lots of these locations, the on-street parking is often underpriced. The bank people say to themselves, "I have no reason to share my parking. I can't charge enough for it to make up for the inconvenience of opening it up to others at night." So it starts with the city charging appropriately for its parking, which creates an economic incentive for the bank. It, then, can charge some money to open the lot at night.

there's a lot of talking it through and explaining how to minimize the risks. It takes people for this to work well, and if there's no one who has that responsibility as part of their job, it doesn't happen.

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TPP: What's the biggest challenge in convincing municipalities to rethink?

RW: It's a continuum between small-town America parking and parking in the big city. In a small town, people expect to park right in front, and they expect it to be free. What's happening that makes people uncomfortable is that those communities are evolving a couple of baby steps more toward the big-city situation, where you're not parking in front, you're paying to park, and you're making choices between how far to walk and how much to spend. The old-timers want to stay in the small-town situation, and the new businesses and new residents are prepared to park and walk a few blocks. It's a tug-of-war.

TPP: The book talks a lot about a push away from parking as a destination and toward parking as a means to multi-modal transportation. Why is that important for the parking industry?

RW: It's a good thing. The walk-bike-shuttle-transit way of thinking can reduce total parking demand and parking can help change people's mode choice. A lot of proponents of multi-modal transportation sometimes oversell how much it will reduce parking demand. It depends completely on the context. What I'm seeing is that first, it's reducing trips before it reduces vehicle ownership. If you do a good job of it, you'll have people walking for shopping and social recreation and trips. The question is when are they going to give up a car out of their household? That requires a high level of transit that links to other destinations.



Multi-modal needs good planning that serves people who don't have cars, and it encourages people who drive to park once and leave their car. Another level we have to get to is in residential parking, and that's important in lowering vehicle ownership-per-household. That's the ultimate place we want to reach.

People who live in downtown San Francisco and downtown Los Angeles are walking to destinations and using transportation often. So they might want to own a car, but it doesn't have to be in their building and they don't have to get to it every day—it can be three blocks away. Remote parking that's cheaper or a way to store a car somewhere else is one way of satisfying people's ideal of owning a car but not using it every day.

TPP: Sounds like that could mean big things for car-sharing companies and providers.

RW: That's more forward into the future. Those services really are going to transform vehicle ownership in urban areas. It's further off, but if we do have autonomous vehicles and if they're electric, it really starts to raise the question of why anyone would want to own a vehicle. Wouldn't you just want to call up a mobility service on your phone? Not everywhere, but in urban areas, the reasons to own a car are being dominated by technology, and these services that use cars more efficiently mean we don't need as much parking per person.

TPP: The book addresses using graduated rates instead of time limits, where you'd pay more for the second two hours than for the first, for example. Why do you think that's a better system in cities?

RW: Some places are trying it. At UCLA, I think the prices are graduated by time stay. Another university tried it, but their equipment had trouble with it. It's relatively new and not widespread, but the great advantage is that continually in business improvement districts, people complain about the time limits. One hour isn't enough, two hours aren't enough. If you can get away from that, you're offering consumers more convenience.

Across the country, there is pushback about high parking enforcement fines. In Los Angeles, people complain that the parking signs are too large. People complain that cities look at tickets as revenue sources and not a way to get parking compliance. Moving away from time limits gets away from situations in which a well-meaning person stays too long and gets a ticket. Customer service comes into the district, and we want people to have a good experience. The challenge is that the equipment has to be able to do it.

TPP: You mentioned pushback—it seems people push back against any parking change, and that's a pretty big one.



RW: They do freak out and they do try to shoot it down. A couple of things I've learned: If you just say, "we're changing parking rules," and leave it out there like that, you make people's ability to say, "I want to keep it the way it is" stronger. When communities adopt a new plan for their downtown and a new economic strategy and they link parking reform to it—"This is our vision, and to get that, we have to manage parking better"—it's a little bit of an easier sell. I did a study recently, and a council member told me five years ago he would have said no to

Given that parking resources are often spread across different departments, this often means organizing a set of statements different sectors can align with. When someone says they don't like increased parking spaces, the mission and vision statement say we're altering rates to achieve target occupancy levels. It helps keep everyone on track.

This goes back to comprehensive management. You've got to have some political leadership or business community leadership to convene your stakeholders and

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it, but that now, it fits in well with a broader vision for the downtown and he was willing to move in that direction.

People who are against this kind of change tend to be longer-term merchants who are very involved in their local chamber and have a standing in the community. People who support it are new business owners, restaurants, bars, and so on. Broadening who's at the planning table is important. If it's just the old guard, they offer the most resistance. There's a lot of talk required—you have to talk through the logic of these changes. Remember that to these people, free parking and minimal parking rules are normal. It's a conceptual thing: The most successful places are charging for parking and managing it, and the ones that are lagging are the ones that still have free parking. My response is that people are not coming to your business for the free parking. That's the truth.

TPP: The book includes a section about mission and vision and why parking departments need to have both. Could you please explain that?

RW: At the same time I was writing that chapter, I was doing a project for a small community in Sacramento that didn't want a vision process. They just wanted a quickie parking study. I made a comment that the comprehensive way is best and that there is merit to experimenting and making changes.

The benefit of having a comprehensive vision is that it helps us say, "We want the right parkers in the right spots." It puts customer service first, not revenue generation, and it offers a vision of how to allocate different user groups to different parking resources.

say, "Let's change what we're doing." Use best practices from other organizations, and offer up what's been done and what the benefits were over time. I do think it takes leadership—it's hard for staff to do this on their own. This can mean educating elected officials about the opportunity costs of status quo. A picture tells a thousand stories, so show them pictures of the under-use of parking in the community. Often, the waste isn't visible. So show them spaces behind the building, underground, on the top of a structure. Convince them there's a problem and then find leaders or champions to carry the charge.

TPP: What's the biggest challenge you see in parking right now?

RW: The biggest mistake is what I call the set-it-and-forget-it idea, from the old infomercial with the guy and his rotisserie chicken machine. We've got time limits of two hours, so we're not going to think about parking. My argument is that it must be actively managed. It requires attention, data collection, monitoring. The biggest mistake in parking is setting and forgetting it.

This is part of a change in the ideas of planning and city management. You used to make a blueprint that was fixed and from that you could predict the future and know where you were headed for 20 years. We need a more actively managed system that uses outcomes, pricing, and policy to reach goals. It's a broader way of thinking of city planning, from using it as a blueprint to thinking of it as a system you're managing for resilience. You don't know the future exactly, but you know the steps you'll take as conditions unfold. It's a different idea of what planning is. **P**