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N AN OLD EPISODE OF “PARKING WARS,” a Philadelphia parking enforcement officer (PEO) walked solemnly back to his vehicle as an irate parking violator hurled such vulgar profanity in his direction that mandatory Federal Communications Commission bleeping was required. In another episode, a citizen constantly yelled at an officer to get out of her neighborhood and go get a real job. Citizens are frequently shown verbally abusing the PEOs.

As a parking enforcement manager, I watch the show sporadically but know this is the type of behavior my team is subjected to every day, sometimes several times a day. I want to step into these television scenes and educate these citizens. PEOs are just like everyone else: hard-working citizens attempting to do their jobs to the best of their ability. More importantly, PEOs offer intrinsic values to the communities they serve in very tangible ways.

Agents of Commerce

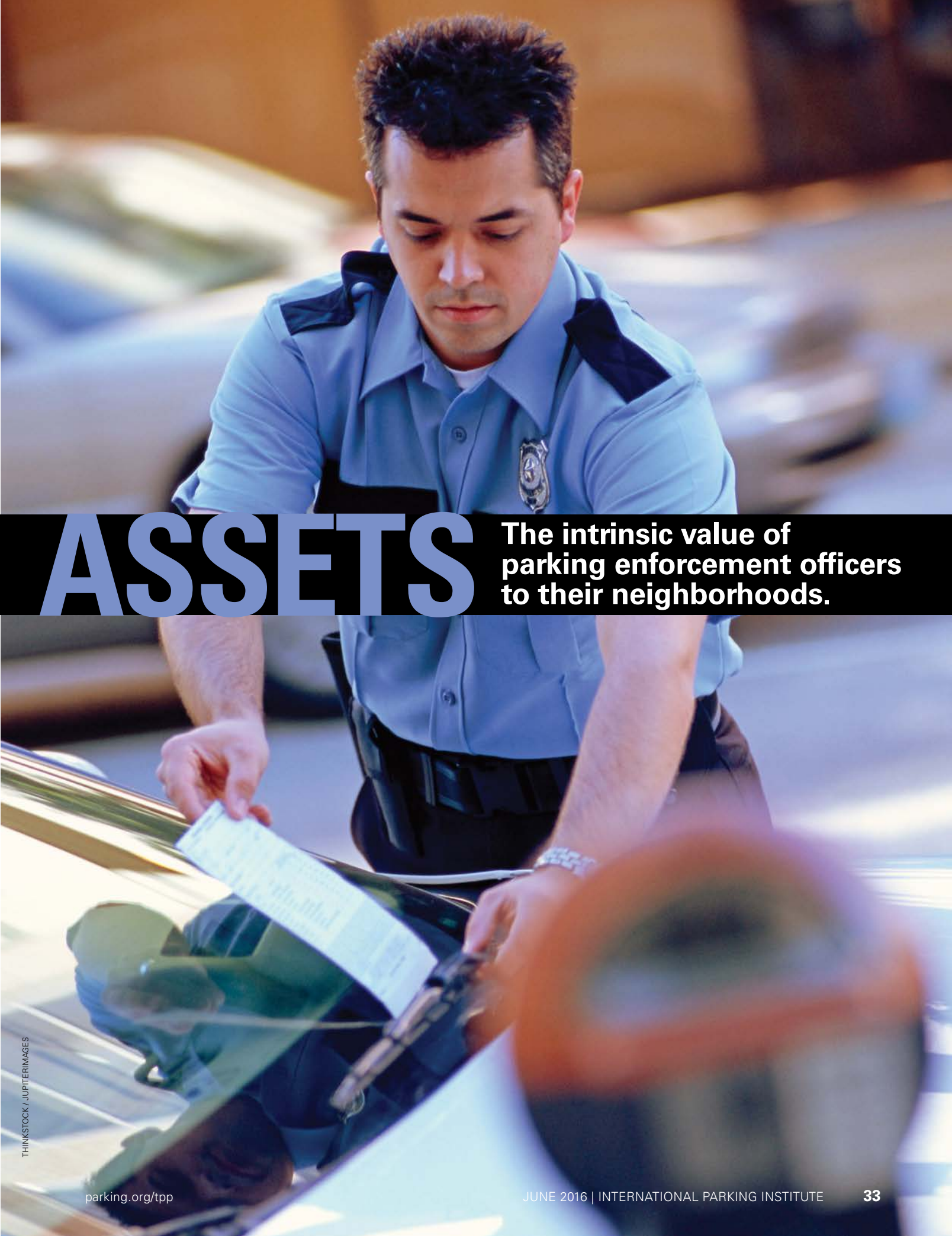
PEOs are agents of commerce. Parking enforcement is defined as the management of on-street real estate in municipalities—parking spaces. Usually, this real estate lies in the busiest part of the municipalities or cities, sometimes called a central business district. The businesses in this area are supported by the parking spaces. Customers must have access to these parking spaces to patronize these businesses.

By Natasha Labi, CAPP

COMMUNITY



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ASSETS

The intrinsic value of parking enforcement officers to their neighborhoods.

More turnover of parking spaces equates to more potential customers for the business owners. PEOs manage the turnover of parking spaces.

Customers consider accessibility and parking in a city not as a perk but as a commodity that has to meet certain standards. Most municipalities and cities have put into place parking laws and ordinances to meet these standards. There are parking time limits to maximize the value for business owners by ensuring the efficient turnover of the spaces. More turnover of parking spaces equates to more potential customers for the business owners. PEOs manage the turnover of parking spaces.

If a vehicle remains in the same parking space without proper payment, it prohibits other potential customers from visiting nearby businesses and spending money there. The PEO monitors these spaces and cites violators. The revenue from these violations and other parking revenue help finance other municipality and city-budget items. During the recent economic downturn, parking revenue was a dependable stream of finance for municipalities and cities, which led to the reduction of parking surcharges in several major cities. Thus, PEOs are agents of commerce in the communities they serve.



Crime Deterrents

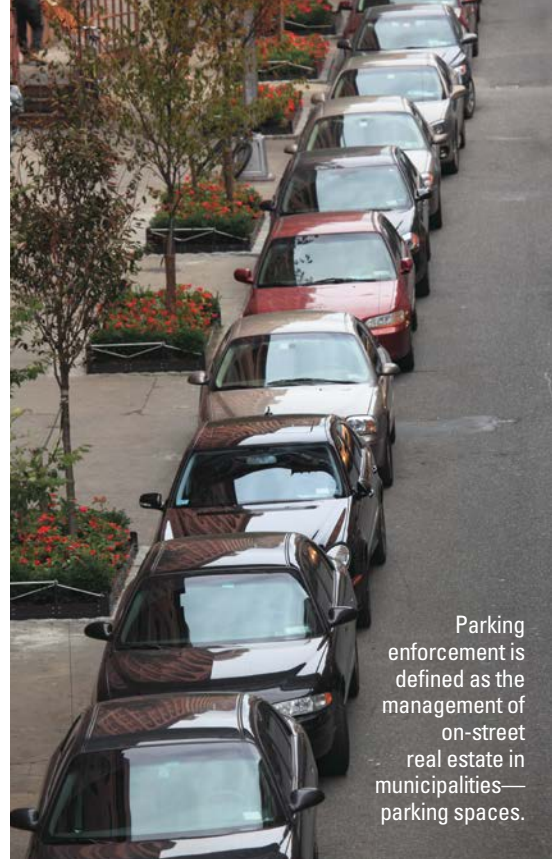
PEOs serve as trained additional eyes and ears for local police in the fight against crime. Crime is a threat to citizens, businesses, municipalities, and commerce as a whole—people generally shy away from doing business in neighborhoods they feel are unsafe.

In most municipalities and cities, reduction of crime is a high priority, and enforcement departments have ongoing efforts to reduce high crime rates in the communities they serve. Some of the efforts have centered on increasing the number of enforcement officers on the streets.

Consider Atlanta, where privatized parking enforcement initiatives have increased the actual number of city police officers on the street. Off-duty and retired Atlanta Police Department (APD) officers are employed by the privatized enforcement agency, increasing the number of law enforcement personnel on the streets at no additional cost to the city. While their main focus during those hours might be enforcing Atlanta's parking enforcement laws and ordinances, the APD officers enforce all laws while they're out. These officers have assisted in everything from the capture of bank robbers



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to routinely providing additional traffic support to major Atlanta events such as the Chik-fil-A Bowl and March Madness competitions.

Because these APD parking enforcement officers are very visible, they may serve as deterrents to crime also. In enforcing parking laws and ordinances, these officers are enforcing beats on the streets. This provides a very community-oriented type of enforcement.

Atlanta also hands some community enforcement to non-sworn officers—lay people trained to provide parking enforcement services. When a crime is committed, these non-sworn officers are able to use their constant radio communication to get a quick response of all enforcement officers in the area and be a source of information. These officers have become very knowledgeable about the city's citizens and businesses.

PEOs are also involved in the war on terrorism. State and local governments are tasked with the responsibility of providing homeland security strategies for their citizens. This strategy also emphasizes the importance of planning, equipping, training, and establishing programs to minimize damage from potential attacks. As frontline enforcement employees, PEOs assist in first-responder efforts.

They are constantly on city streets with radio communication. Formal training is given to PEOs in many cities and municipalities. PEOs are trained to identify anomalies in communities and especially on the streets of their neighborhood noticing things such as an unmarked van parked inconspicuously in an alley of a government building. The PEO is able to notify police via radio communication immediately. Being part of the enforcement environment allows PEOs to truly serve the community.

Ambassadors


PEOs serve as ambassadors to their communities. Every municipality and city wants to attract visitors and their dollars. These visitors may range from the surrounding suburbanites on a rare trip to the big city, to the tourist in town for the big game or concert, or the businessperson in town for a convention. These visitors are valuable sources of commerce for the local economy and can translate into big business. Thus, it is critical for visitors to have a positive experience.

PEOs are commonly the first contact for these visitors. The PEO is out there enforcing, walking the city streets in an official-looking uniform. The visitors are naturally drawn to the PEO in times of confusion in a strange new city. PEOs become the frontline employees with the ability to help the visitor have that positive memorable experience. If the visitor has a memorable experience, it is more likely he or she will return to the city and share the good time with family and friends. Thus, PEOs are true frontline ambassadors for municipalities and cities.

It is imperative that the frontline parking enforcement officer be equipped with excellent customer service training. Most municipalities and cities have training programs that include the basics: how to greet customers, listening to customer needs or problems, confirming understanding, using

positive language, dealing with angry customers, and the importance of having welcoming body language and tone.

Parking enforcement customer service training should also incorporate specific knowledge of the area. PEOs should know directions to the city's major streets, tourist attractions, banks, and restaurants. Some municipalities and cities have even taken customer service training to another level by offering customer service certifications. These certification programs offer common standards of customer service knowledge and practices in which local municipality employees and businesses participate. PEOs, using customer service training, share their knowledge of the city and or region, answer frequently asked questions, and deliver a positive experience for the visitor. PEOs serve as ambassadors of every municipality's and city's goal, promoting the city as a great place to live, work, play, and visit.

Every day, television shows like "Parking Wars" portray angry parking customers yelling obscenities at a PEO as the officer issues a citation. They don't realize that as an agent of commerce, the PEO manages municipalities' and cities' most valuable assets—real estate. As parking enforcement managers, we should remind our officers of these values to empower the PEOs' sense of job performance, job satisfaction, and pride in serving the community. 

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