



The new space race

All this traffic – it’s got to stop somewhere, but who wants to pay for parking? As RANDY SALZMAN discovers on a fact-finding mission to California, it’s not quite as simple as that. A new parking scheme is producing some rather unexpected results

Soon after I left the theater, walking near Sunset and Vine in Hollywood, two attractive young women in a PT Cruiser pulled up. “Are you parked around here somewhere?” the driver asked enticingly.

“No,” I replied and held up my ring finger, “besides I’m happily married.” The driver sniggered and drove away to address a couple in their 50s to ask the same question. The girls, I realized sheepishly, hadn’t been soliciting my companionship. Rather, hoping we graybeards were headed home at the same moment they hit the clubs, they were seeking an unenforced parking meter instead of forking over US\$10 to a private lot. Cruising for parking at 10:45pm on a Friday, the dressed-to-kill girls were practicing the American way - trying to scam the system.

“You’ve heard the mantra that information wants to be free,” Dr Donald Shoup (right, astride his bicycle) of UCLA’s Institute of Transportation Studies had told me only hours earlier. “My mantra is that parking wants to be paid for. Just that none of us want to pay for it.”

Therein lies the rub – and the reason I was in California instead of home on the other side of the country on my bicycle. Parking: a subject that almost everyone believes there’s not enough of and a policy issue that is causing, according to Dr. Shoup’s research, substantial losses in greenhouse emissions, oil dependency, rational human activity and even equity. Not to mention massive amounts of lost sales tax revenue for local governments across the land.





Parking



The best things in life are....

Here, in California, the most car-centric place on the planet, Dr. Shoup's 30 years of research into parking issues is paying off with a recent explosion of communities seeking benefits from "performance parking" policies. Led by Old Pasadena's economic resurgence since installing meters around the famed Route 66 almost 20 years ago, other localities from San Francisco to Redwood City to Juneau, Alaska and even to originally skeptical high-end sections of greater Los Angeles, policy planners are concluding that there is a high cost of free parking and are charging something about it.

Though it seems counter-intuitive, once parking is "depoliticized" by seeking to maintain an 85 per cent occupancy rate rather than seeking to maintain some arbitrary price, the "gold in them thar meters" creates money and momentum for civic improvements, helps build a thriving local business community – sometimes willing even to tax itself more -- and produces smarter shoppers drawn to the cleaner, safer areas, all the while blurring typical political distinctions. Leftist groups, for example, interested in global warming and pollution, usually invite Dr. Shoup to speak about a powerful free market concept which rightist chamber of commerce types often fail to grasp. The bottom line, with now the numbers to back it up for our quantitative planning culture, is that the free market charging for parking increases traffic in stores and restaurants, and therefore economic activity, while decreasing congestion, pollution and oil dependency. It's a win-win-win, Shoup says



Parking

Curbed enthusiasm

Shoup's data illustrates that charging for curb parking actually boosts area revenues and is a major factor in revitalizing skid rows, even if many businessmen can't wrap their minds around the concept. Old Pasadena is Shoup's oyster. Where pawn shops, thrift stores and boarded up windows dominated Colorado Boulevard in the early 1990s, Crate & Barrel, Eileen Fisher and a host of trendy restaurants today overcome parking's "Tragedy of the Commons." When parking spaces are free, as Shoup has been pointing out since the mid-1970s, everyone overstays them, especially the waiters and clerks at local stores who arrive early and take the best spots, cajoling shoppers and restaurant patrons to loosen their purse strings elsewhere.

The parking-charge effect is so prominent that locations on Old Pasadena alleys, where dumpsters, dead dogs and an occasional deceased human were found as recently as 1995, are now prized business locations. Art, potted plants, benches and historical markers, plus yellow-shirted security staffers, paid for with some US\$5m annually in parking money, draw in walkers, bicyclists and buyers from outside the area and are key factors in increasing the number of Old Pasadena residences from 100 to 1,600 in less than two decades.

Old Pasadena's sales tax revenues have skyrocketed since 1993 to the point that businessmen from areas like San Diego's high-end La Jolla are bused in today to study the phenomena. Economically, an area where plywood to cover windows was once a hot sales item, is now the epitome of trend with shoppers sipping skinny lattes in the morning and Margaritas in the evening behind massive sun glasses and bags of purchases.

At Pasadena's new Metro Gold Line commuter rail station, other shoppers stagger in with bags and boxes from Shoe Warehouse and Tiffany & Co., some so big they block the aisle, for the trip back to LA and Glendale.

On one Raymond Street block over 30 minutes during a June "Make Music Pasadena" festival which eliminated two dozen curb parking spots, at least one space was open at all times and no driver attempted to bypass putting quarters in the meters. Indeed, neither a 40ish Anglo female attorney nor a teenage Hispanic skateboarder even considered, or gruged, the change they inserted above the notation that "Your Meter Money Makes a Difference in Old Pasadena."

Though both knew that 90 minutes of parking was free in three city-owned decks within a half mile, their only concerns were potential parking tickets, and they therefore made quick purchases - clothing in the attorney's case and fast-food in the skateboarder's - and drove away while the meter was still ticking.

"Whenever I'm speaking, there is always one man, always a man, who says he won't go to a restaurant if he has to pay for parking," Dr. Shoup laughs, "and I've learned to just note that if he won't pay for the space, someone else will pay for the convenience of parking close to the restaurant. We need to find the 'Goldilocks Principle' for parking in any given area. Not too high because then no one parks, not too low because then everyone stays and stays and there is never a space but if you get parking prices 'just right' drivers come and go quickly without cruising for parking."

That's what the girls were doing when they approached me in Hollywood - cruising in hopes of locating an unoccupied, after-



hours space on the street rather than pay the US\$10 private-lot flat-rate. Surprisingly, several studies across America indicate that 30 percent of central business district traffic today is drivers seeking a low-cost, or free, place to park. Shoup's research indicates that over the course of a year automobiles in one 15-block area near UCLA drive 950,000 excess miles seeking parking, the equivalent of 38 trips around the Earth. Each driver is individually losing over three minutes searching for a space while cumulatively they are wasting 47,000 gallons of auto fuel and adding 730 tons of greenhouse emissions to LA's toxic atmosphere.

One study on the other side of the continent is even more shocking. Transportation Alternatives in New York City found that 45 per cent of Brooklyn drivers were cruising for that all-important cheap parking space.

Joking apart

Parking, in short, is no laughing matter. But Shoup, virtually alone among the world's academics to study what cars do 95 per cent of any given 24 hours, has had to approach this serious subject with an open funny bone to gain traction in planning circles.

Mark Yamarone, who studied under Shoup at UCLA, and today works in Pasadena public parking is quick to note however that intelligent pricing is only one of three elements in the Old Pasadena turnaround. The other two - parking revenue going to a Business Improvement District (run by area merchants) and suspension of the city's traditional parking requirements in favor of parking credits - have moved to keep the commercial areas "safe and clean," the mantra of the local businesswoman who chairs Old Pasadena's BID.

Daily, Old Pasadena's streets are swept, sidewalks are power-washed twice monthly, graffiti is gone within 24 hours and every

"Parking wants to be paid for, it's just that none of us wants to pay for it"



alley has its own personal historic marker while the trees get watered and the tourists stroked by yellow-shirted staffers who patrol any, and everywhere, looking like the cops they are not. They help with explaining bus schedules and pointing out store locations while the area generates some US\$3m annually writing tickets and the meters themselves provide US\$550,000.

“It’s just pure collaboration, a public-private success story,” Yamarone says. “The parking meters wouldn’t work until the businesses could see the benefits for everyone, including themselves. They then bought into it because they were empowered on the parking commission for setting the (meter) rates and for how the money is spent. They wear both a merchant’s hat and a parking hat.”

Within a decade after Old Pasadena’s meters were installed, a 1980s mall - with oodles of free parking - was torn down and turned into an open-air market to the joy of the local business community who, by then, recognized the value of an outdoors walking environment.

Further underlining the effect, the private parking community today provides better service at less cost. Around Old Pasadena a dozen bright yellow umbrellas, the same color as Old Pasadena Guide uniforms, entice drivers to leave their cars for US\$7, about a third less than other LA-area private lots. Drivers hand over keys and head for Old Pasadena’s shops and restaurants while the valet delivers the car to a nearby private deck. When the driver wants her car a couple of hours later, she pulls out her cell phone and the car is transported to the shopper anywhere in the commercial district, even if it is entirely on the other side of Old Pasadena. Better service at less cost is of course the epitome of free market efficiency, but here it is pushed along by competition created from Old Pasadena’s public parking policies.

Space isn’t the issue

The last piece of Old Pasadena’s puzzle disassembles America’s parking zoning requirements which have been set, primarily, Shoup argues, by adopting requirements already coded in other jurisdictions, generally suburban jurisdictions where land is cheap and parking almost always free. In an extreme case, Montgomery County, Maryland for example requires that funeral parlors provide 83 spaces per each 1,000 square feet of the facility’s main chapel, meaning that the parking lot will be 25 times as large as the area for human mourners, the deceased and his or her family.

Most planners don’t try to re-invent this wheel and simply copy these kinds of standards into their own zoning rules. Older areas, like Old Pasadena before the new regime, are therefore greatly restricted by parking zoning requirements. Building a high-end eatery with the average 20 demanded parking spaces per 1,000 square feet of floor space means, in many cases, that a

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restaurateur renovating an old downtown building must buy another block, tear down its existing buildings and cover the area with asphalt, decreasing the visual attraction of refurbishing an historic building and greatly increasing the cost of doing business.

At roughly US\$30,000 a space (US\$88,000 in Washington DC), many businessmen simply won’t rebuild older areas and the historic infrastructure gradually falls apart. But in Old Pasadena, the renovator can buy parking credits at US\$150 a year per space in the city’s nearby garages, meaning that a restaurant zoned for 20 spaces gets by at one-tenth the cost of building one new space. That’s part of the reason that Old Pasadena’s alleys are no longer for cars, dumpsters and graffiti and are, instead, attractive shopping showcases for walkers and bicyclists and part of the reason that prices throughout the trendy area are reasonable. Meanwhile, the city can, in effect, calculate realistic turnover of parking spaces and promote the re-use of existing, historic buildings.

“We don’t need more parking, we need more parking management,” Shoup explains, noting that the US has several parking spaces for every automobile today. “The claim that ‘there’s not enough parking’ which every city planner hears a lot, is really ‘there’s not enough free parking within a few feet of where I want to go.’”

The results of a dozen studies indicate that where on-street parking is free or low-cost, private lots are underutilized and the first-come, first-served nature of on-street ensures more cruising and reduced parking turnover which is bad for business and, therefore, bad for governmental tax revenues. With the Goldilocks price, Shoup argues that waiters and clerks will bicycle, walk, carpool, take the bus or park in the cheaper, long-term decks, therefore freeing spaces for paying customers. To get to the win-win of decreased driving and the bigger-win of increased economic activity, a community should charge just the right price for parking and use the income wisely.

“Our public-private parking management situation works because of the knowledge ‘we’ (the Old Pasadena business community) bring to it,” says Marilyn Buchanan, a local real estate owner and leader of businesses assessing themselves a higher tax rate to supplement Old Pasadena’s US\$1,700 per meter income. “Obviously, the sales lady at J. Crew doesn’t have any idea of what goes on, nor does the J. Crew owner in New York.

“But those of us who will never go away, we get it. We have the passion for Old Pasadena and the business sense to recognize long-term good. Money is still a very personal issue and you can’t just take our money and throw it into the general fund. Our money belongs here in Old Pasadena and we know how to put it to good use. Not selfish use but use for the good of the community which in the end of course helps us, the business people.”

Who would have thought that anything, especially parking, would cajole business people to charge themselves rates higher than tax commissioners? It’s counter intuitive, right? But so are most things in Don Shoup’s real world of parking. **TH**

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