

Finding A Parking Space

by Bruce Schaller

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Traffic congestion has been the focus of much recent discussion, but parking actually gets more complaints, according to [a Tri-State Transportation Campaign public opinion survey](#) , which last year found that more New York City residents consider parking to be a problem in their neighborhood than traffic. This was true even though only about one-half the survey respondents own a car. Finding a parking space is so difficult that some motorists have arrangements to sell their parking space to their neighbor or corner merchant when they leave their space in the morning.

Parking issues and possible solutions were highlighted during the first week of March by the visit to New York of UCLA professor Donald Shoup, author of "The High Cost of Free Parking." In a recent Wall Street Journal article, Shoup was hailed as a "parking rock star" by Paul White of Transportation Alternatives, the host for his visit, not the usual description for a 68-year-old professor of urban planning.

Shoup proposes that cities raise curbside parking fees on commercial strips to achieve an equilibrium between parking supply and demand, in the same way that private garages raise rates for off-street parking if they find their garages are consistently filled. Shoup says that metered fees should be set at the "lowest price necessary" to maintain a 15 percent vacancy rate at curb spaces, a rate at which there is likely to be an open space on every block at all times. The rate might vary by time of day and would certainly vary by location. Areas with high demand for parking would have the highest meter rates. Tony neighborhoods in London, which follow this approach, charge \$8 an hour for parking.

Benefits Of Increased Parking Fees

What are the benefits of this proposal? Shoup emphasizes that the incremental fee revenue generated by increased parking fees should be dedicated to fixing sidewalks, steam cleaning them every other month, planting trees, installing street furniture and otherwise enhancing the streetscape. These improvements might be managed by local business improvement districts (BIDs), thus creating a powerful constituency to ensure that the parking fees are collected and the revenue spent as intended. Shoup points to Old Pasadena, California, as an example of the success of this approach. This once-derelict downtown adopted market rate pricing for its parking and is now a thriving retail district that draws visitors from throughout Southern California.

Market rate pricing for curb parking would also reduce traffic. Shoup points out that a lot of traffic is generated not by motorists going to their destination but by motorists who have arrived

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at their destination and are searching for a parking spot. Various surveys in New York have shown that between 15 percent and 45 percent of traffic on the city's streets consists of cars searching for a parking space. Freeing up spaces would greatly reduce the mileage spent cruising for parking, as well as reduce double-parking by motorists who cannot find a space, and thus reduce traffic and air pollution throughout the city.

Shoup suggests that the city could use technology to help make the program work effectively. Parking meters can be networked so that city officials know which spaces are currently being paid for. Devices implanted in the pavement can detect when a vehicle is occupying the space, so that parking enforcement can be directed to areas with high violation rates. These devices can also be used to track occupancy rates so that city officials know when to adjust parking fees to maintain a 15 percent vacancy rate. Devices that motorists hang inside their car windows can be used to pay for parking, doing away with the need to stock up on quarters and enabling drivers to pay only for the time they are actually parked.

Objections to Higher Curbside Parking Fees

Shoup's ideas expand to auto parking the principles the city has already applied to commercial parking in Midtown Manhattan. The city's commercial parking program charges delivery vehicles escalating curbside fees for spaces that were formerly free. The program has won the support of delivery companies by making it easier for delivery drivers to find a space and by greatly reducing double-parking.

Yet despite the success of this approach for commercial parking, the idea of higher fees for cars to park on commercial strips meets with resistance by some residents and merchants. People do not exactly welcome having to pay more for something that was once free or very cheap. They are particularly concerned about the impact of higher fees on lower-income drivers and on local merchants.

Another objection involves parking fine revenue. If there were less double-parking or less illegal parking, would not this cost the city government a considerable portion of the \$550 million in parking fine revenue it takes in every year?

A third objection focuses on the spillover effects of higher parking fees. Won't drivers simply divert to side streets where parking is only subject to alternate side regulation, thus transplanting but not reducing the cruising mileage? Or won't the availability of metered spaces attract more people to drive and park, thus offsetting the reduction in cruising?

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Answering The Objections

There are counterarguments to these objections. For example, government survey data show that only two percent of shopping trips by lower-income people involve driving to the store and parking at a metered space. Shoppers are far more likely to walk or use the bus or subway than to drive; those who do drive primarily park in free off-street lots. Thus, far more lower-income shoppers would benefit through streetscape improvements than would be affected by higher parking fees.

The concern about fine revenue seems premature. This program would have to be very widely and very successfully implemented before there is any chance that parking reform turns parking enforcement personnel into the mythical Maytag repairman with nothing to do.

Since parking fees will promote turnover and thus increase the effective capacity of metered spaces, and ensure that a metered space is virtually always available, it seems far more likely to reduce cruising than increase it.

More broadly, maybe the real "problem" with Shoup's ideas is that they seem too good to be true. Shoup claims that market rate pricing of metered spaces will be good for everyone -- motorists who can depend on finding a spot, merchants who will have a higher flow of customers because parking spaces turnover more quickly, bus riders and other drivers because there will be less traffic and less double parking, and everyone who walks the sidewalks because revenues will be applied to streetscape improvements.

But -- there is no such thing as a free lunch, right? Let's find the fatal flaw: it's inequitable, it'll clog traffic on the side streets, the city's treasury will suffer, the plan will attract more drivers.

New Yorkers' sharp-witted instincts might be applied more usefully to the dysfunctional operation of the street space that we live with every day. Who in their right mind would design a system that guarantees that a substantial portion of traffic is simply from motorists driving in circles? Why give a break to people who want to park all day instead of opening up spaces to a stream of people with shopping or other errands? Why should city officials collect five times more revenue from parking violations than from parking fees? Why does it make sense for landlords to charge market rate rents on one side of the sidewalk but for the city to vastly under-price the real estate it owns on the other side? Since motorists are almost entirely from

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the upper ends of the income scale, why is equity trumped as an objection to market rate curb pricing?

Shoup believes that none of this makes any sense. He thinks that once people think through the issue, they will see the merits of applying market principles that are so familiar for most goods and services to the problem of finding a parking space in New York



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