

PARKING IN DOWNTOWN PETALUMA

More Convenience and Less Cost

Some Suggestions from the
SONOMA COUNTY TRANSPORTATION AND LAND-USE COALITION

March, 2005

Everybody likes free parking.

Nobody wants to pay the cost of providing it.

*But everybody pays, one way or another,
whether they like it or not, whether they use it
a lot, or not at all.*



Rail Service, Downtowns, and Parking in Petaluma

SCTLC, the Sonoma County Transportation and Land-use Coalition, has a long term interest in transportation and land-use everywhere in Sonoma County. We believe that rail service and city centers will receive mutual benefits from teamwork between SMART (Sonoma-Marin Area Rail Transit district) and the cities that will be served by its trains.

Cities along the tracks vary in their enthusiasm for seizing the opportunity of rail service, and in their willingness to shift toward TOD (Transit Oriented Development). Petaluma is off to a better start than any other city along the line. While it could be argued that Windsor is the most purposeful in working toward TOD, Petaluma is probably in a stronger position by virtue of its history. It still retains elements of its historical relationship between land use and rail passenger service.

While Petaluma is moving forward with pedestrian oriented design in the vicinity of its rail station, it vacillates on what to do about parking. This indecision is shared with all the other cities along the line. None of them are quite sure whether they want to be cities or suburbs.

The suburban practice of providing free parking for all was the most important single reason for the decline of urban centers, and the centers will not recover as long as they maintain that outdated practice. Parking near downtown rail stations needs to be handled differently than parking at a suburban mall. In this report we outline a strategy that should prove less painful than some of the options thus far considered.

The parking debate in Petaluma

In reading through recent news accounts about downtown parking, the consistent underlying theme is that other people should pay.

- The business owners and land owners want the taxpayers to pay.
- The car drivers want the merchants to pay, and maybe the taxpayers can chip in.
- The city wants the businesses to pay, or else the car drivers.

This situation isn't unusual. The wish to have someone else pay for one's parking is as universal as private automobiles (photo).

A secondary theme in the Petaluma parking saga is that, no matter how strong the preference for parking at the curb, people will instead choose to park in garages if the garages are attractive enough.

The same story could be told about most cities throughout the United States. And like most cities, the debate



Goals of the Revolution - Hand painted wall decoration in the Basque region of Spain.

has gone on for a long time, yet Petaluma appears to be no closer to an acceptable solution.

Who can resist free parking, no matter how much it costs someone else?

Regardless of who foots the bill, parking is very expensive, especially for a high density central area. It warrants good management. How many of the business owners think that their own good management means giving away the goods that customers most want?

Even though many people express their pleasure with the demise of parking meters, meters remain one of the best tools for management of parking systems. The most important place to have them is where they seem to be most despised -- at the curb, at the most popular parking locations.

Managing curb parking becomes easy with meters, and once curb parking is functional, off-street parking solutions will follow.

Pricing of goods and services has been the accepted way of managing enterprises in the United States since its founding. Unfortunately, the car parking enterprise long ago took a sharp turn in another direction when "free" became the basic rule. Since then, parking management has had to rely instead on cajoling, regulation, intimidation, fines and towing.

If people are being encouraged to park off-street in order to free up curb parking, then the price of garage parking must be less than the price for curb parking. This can't be done where the price of curb parking is zero.

Managing Curb Parking

Ultimately, all parking needs to be managed, but first things first. This discussion focuses on curb parking because that's what most drivers are looking for.

Will parking fees drive customers out of town?

This has been said so often that it is widely believed. But if fees are used to create parking convenience and a better street environment, there will be more customers in the downtown, not fewer.

Since most drivers are looking for a place at the curb near their destination, convenience means finding one of those spaces available. Having spaces in a garage doesn't count for much, and finding all curb spaces occupied is frustrating.

The right price for curb parking is the lowest price that keeps a few spaces available to allow convenient access. The long established rule of thumb for parking management is to leave approximately 1 out of 7 spaces vacant, so that drivers can always find a space where they want one.

When this rule of thumb is followed, approximately 15% of the spaces are vacant, which means the other 85% are filled with customers who **have not been driven away** by parking fees. Furthermore, because the turnover in use of **all** of the spaces is greater when they are paid for, it is easy to see that there are actually **more** customers in the area than there would be if the parking is "free".

Does this mean that customers won't complain about having to pay? No, many will complain,

especially near the time that meters are installed, in the hope that their pleas will make them disappear. Others will realize that it is the fees themselves that maintain enough open spaces so that they won't have to cruise around looking for a convenient space.

Time limits; creating anxiety for the customers

Charging for curb parking at a rate that keeps a few spaces available for new arrivals has long been acknowledged as an easy way to assure parking turnover. Nevertheless, when parking managers just don't want to charge for parking for any reason, they usually impose time limits instead. This does create turnover, but it too has a price.

How successful would the telephone companies be if they decided to keep people from over-using their phone service by limiting all calls to 15 minutes? Or if they decreed that going over the 15 minute mark should deserve a large penalty? As it happens, telephone companies don't do that. Coincidentally, their customers don't suffer from "time limit anxiety".

Parking space management can relieve time limit anxiety in several ways. By charging rates just high enough to keep a few spaces available at all times, time limits are usually unnecessary, or at least can be comfortably long.

Of course, meters themselves can cause anxiety. But parkers have the choice of putting in extra money to make sure they won't face an expiration if they return a little later than expected. Even better is when modern meters are used that accept smart cards. They can refund overpayments.

Reduce the cost of enforcement

No matter what system is used to manage parking, enforcement is a necessary cost of doing business. Enforcement is easier and more effective with meters.

The regular and routine enforcement and servicing of parking meters also deters vehicle related crimes, because it keeps some official eyes on the street. The Pasadena Police Department recognized this side effect, and advocated successfully for extending meter hours later into the evening.

Making meters acceptable

The first parking meters were installed in Oklahoma City in 1935. Usually this was done on only one side of the downtown streets, to show people how the meters worked. The metered side became preferred by both drivers and merchants, because there was always room to park. That led to demands for meters on the other sides, and in other districts, and in other towns. Within two years there were 20,000 meters, in 35 cities.

After that auspicious beginning, something happened later that made the meters go away. It was probably something like this: The spread of the automobile and cheap gas allowed people to move out of the city where less expensive land made parking easy and therefore free. Back in the cities, the reaction to the loss of residents and dwindling business was to copy the suburban pattern by making parking plentiful and free. Of course, city land was still expensive, so the cost was very high. Without meter revenue, the costs were shifted elsewhere, particularly into the cost of construction. In some cases the cities provided the parking, paid for out of general taxation. Mostly, the cities avoided levying taxes by

shifting the cost of parking to the developers, who in turn passed the costs along to building owners, who in turn passed the cost on ..., etc.

A possible first step for a city to extract itself from this costly situation is to find out just what that cost is. Most city governments have an inkling that parking is costing a lot, but may have preferred ignorance, especially since most of the cost is well hidden in the cost of doing business.

Easy start. If the goal is to have at least a 15% vacancy rate everywhere and at all times, **there is no reason to put meters everywhere.** They would be placed only where curb use is above the 85% level.

Rates would be set to keep it approximately at the 85% level. Ideally, charges would vary by day of week and time of day. Time variable rates have been difficult prior to modern meters, but it can now be done, and the capability warrants the extra cost, even if it might not be used immediately.

Capabilities of modern meters. Meters today come in a range of sizes and capabilities. The ones that replace the old single space meters look much the same, but being electronic, have a number of features that weren't possible with mechanical meters.

Meters built to handle a number of spaces, called pay stations, can be even more sophisticated than single space meters. Whatever convenience is lost in walking to a machine from a parking space is compensated by the conveniences offered. Of course, if they are merely used to collect quarters, then the convenience is less because of the extra walking.

By accepting bills, stored value smart cards, or even credit cards, they eliminate the customer necessity of carrying a pocket full of quarters (although they still allow coins to be used). Just this one feature has the potential for relieving much of the parking anxiety. Computer diagnostics help keep the meters operating reliably, and computer connections allow data to be passed back and forth quickly by operations personnel.

The multi-space machines can handle Pay-and-Display or Pay-by-Space from the same machine, provide audible instructions, accept smartcards and credit cards through the same reader, and even write parking tickets when that becomes necessary, while providing information that reduces the number of disputes.

Money for Improving the Business District

The Petaluma Downtown Association wanted its business and building owner members in the business improvement district (BID) to join a new benefit assessment district to pay for maintenance and security at the Keller Street garage. It had a hard time getting the necessary support. Although these associations normally require taxation to fund desired business improvements, curb parking fees could help with the garage as well as other area improvements.

A PBD (Parking Benefit District) might prove more acceptable to the members of the BID. It is like an assessment district, with one additional feature: it brings outside money in to help fund the desired improvements. In this case it is the net revenue gained from parking fees. The direct maintenance of the parking system would probably be undertaken by the city at cost, and the net revenue would be turned over to the PBD for its normal purposes. The

responsibilities of each party would be subject to negotiation.

Parking handled in this manner is a departure from past practice, where the city simply collects the fees and puts the net revenue into the general budget, or into a fund for building more off-street parking, or paying off revenue bonds that already built such parking. But that practice, unfortunately, never provided any incentive to local residents or business owners to want parking meters on their streets.

As far as we know, Old Pasadena was the pioneer for the Parking Benefit District (although it probably never used that name). It was the crucial tool for turning around a blighted and declining old area, and making it one of the hot spots of Southern California. At the time that rejuvenation began, Pasadena was, like Petaluma, a city that reviled parking meters and felt that it needed lots of free parking. After installing the meters and sequestering the funds in this manner, Old Pasadena thrived. More suburb-like parts of Pasadena had to take notice, and ultimately some began to follow the same practices. One case was very dramatic. A large enclosed mall with free parking was torn down and replaced with smaller scale buildings fronting restored streets with metered parking.

At right is a photo of the ordinary meters in use 10 years ago in Old Pasadena, telling the user that the money would be used to make improvements in the vicinity of that parking space.



Meter in Old Pasadena

Weapons of Mass Detection

Petaluma has decided to use a high tech approach to capturing the scofflaw parkers. If the new mobile GPS/camera devices work as expected, people won't be able to rub off chalk marks or move their cars to a new space every couple of hours in order to avoid parking tickets. This ought to get more people parking in the garage, and free up some street spaces in the near term.

There will always be a need for this kind of enforcement where meters are not used. But it doesn't address the long term problem that is the subject of this report, which is the ever-growing requirement for parking garages as business and other activities intensify in the downtown.

Continuing to build more garages in order to keep up with wanted growth defeats the opportunity of providing travel alternatives with fewer vehicles, and a more pedestrian oriented environment. Metering spaces in downtown locations wherever needed to keep 15% available will allow a continual adjustment to the increasing value of the underlying land, in keeping with policies intended to make the most of the North Bay taxpayers' investment in rail transit.

In Conclusion

We believe that following the course of action outlined here will result in a more vital and thriving downtown.

This is not proposed as a way of quickly raising the funds to pay the city's expenses incurred to fix up the Keller Street garage. Although the long term prospect for raising revenue is good, any attempt to impose area-wide metering hurriedly in order to raise city funds would be ill-advised, and would undoubtedly backfire.

Unlike road widening projects, which generally need to be undertaken as large projects, parking management is inherently incremental.

Because it can be undertaken as a series of small steps with continual evaluation, there will be minimum risk of failure.

Paying for what one receives is a system that makes things go smoothly in most other walks of life – eating, housing, entertainment, communications, etc. There is no reason it can't work for access to shopping and entertainment in a downtown. For busy people the personal benefits of convenient parking will easily outweigh the personal cost of the fees.

Parking will be more convenient because there will almost always be curb spaces available where they are wanted. Parking will be less costly to provide because seldom-used spaces can be converted to more profitable uses.

Once such a system is in place, Petaluma will have taken a big step toward rail readiness. A more attractive downtown will encourage a lot of people to get on and off those trains in Petaluma.

More information

A fuller discussion of many of the points raised in this paper may be found in a book by Donald Shoup, Professor of Urban Planning, UCLA: *The High Cost of Free Parking*, American Planning Association, March, 2005.

The most relevant chapter for downtowns is Ch 16, “Turning Small Change into Big Changes”, which compares the successful approach used in Old Pasadena with the more traditional approach of Westwood Village. Pre-publication drafts of Chapters 16, 17 and 19 are available for downloading on the SCTLC website, at http://sonomatlc.org/Parking/PBDs/Pkg_Benefit_Districts.htm

One of the best contacts for learning how things got done in Old Pasadena is Marsha Rood, who was the Director of Redevelopment during that period of the City's history. She is Principal at Urban Reinventions in Pasadena, and can be reached at 626.568.8329 or marsharood@earthlink.net.

Because Pasadena is now a city with three rail stations, any city anticipating its own rail stations would benefit from having a few citizens and staff spend a day there.

