

Parking Trends for Downtown Areas February 2016

Parking in connection with central business districts has been an issue since the automobile supplanted public transit and walking as the primary means of getting to and around downtown. By the 1940's and '50's, most jurisdictions with some form of zoning regulation had adopted parking requirements intended to match the various uses with their parking demand. Almost universally, these codes established minimum standards, leaving it to the private market to determine what the real or perceived demand should be above those minimums.

These parking standards were generally applied to new development and most particularly to the growing suburbs. The traditional downtowns were still dependent on street parking or parking garages, which might be private or public.

Parking meters were employed primarily as a means of creating the turnover of spaces, which was especially important to retailers who wanted to keep the customers coming and going. This was more important in mature downtowns where off-street parking was minimal or non-existent.

Parking Districts

To help compete with the suburban shopping malls with their acres of free parking, cities began to employ concepts such as business improvement districts (BID's) or some form of parking district program. BID's were usually some form of public-private partnership where the businesses within the district agreed to tax themselves to pay for infrastructure improvements, which would supplement city projects to help draw customers to the downtown area. Parking districts were similar but limited to the provision of off-street parking, primarily through the construction of parking lots and garages to serve the area. Similar to BID's, the businesses within the parking district would tax themselves to aid in supporting the construction and operation of the public parking facilities.

Montgomery County instituted a parking district program beginning in Silver Spring in the early 1950's. Besides Silver Spring, there are parking districts in Montgomery Hills, Wheaton, and Bethesda. Within each district, the properties are required to either provide all required parking on site, or pay the *ad valorem* parking tax. The funds from the tax along with the meter and garage fees pay to provide and support parking facilities within each district. In Montgomery Hills, there are metered surface lots. In the other three districts there are a combination of metered surface lots and garages.

Montgomery County enacted a new zoning ordinance in the fall of 2013. Within the off-street parking requirements, the County divided the parking requirements based on categories of uses. Those uses in the agricultural, residential and industrial zones use a standard baseline minimum requirement with standards similar to the City's.

In the County's Commercial/Residential and Employment zones, the requirements in parking districts or reduced parking areas have both a minimum and maximum

requirement, both of which are reduced from the baseline in the residential and industrial zones. In areas outside a parking district or reduced parking area, there is a minimum requirement, which is also generally less than the baseline.

Circulators

Some downtowns have instituted low cost or free circulator bus systems as a way to improve movement in downtowns without people having to drive themselves. The patrons can park once, perhaps at the edge of downtown, and use the system any time of day or evening. In this region, there are circulator systems in in downtown Washington, D.C., Silver Spring and Bethesda. People seem to be more willing to park off-site and use the bus with short headways and direct access to their destinations.

Flexible Parking Standards in Rockville

When the Town Square project was initiated in 2003 the developers felt that the City's parking standards would result in a much larger parking requirement than was necessary. The parking proposed in the PDP application was based on the analysis done by the applicant's parking consultant, Walker Associates. Their methodology used different generation rates based on the types of uses and their peak demand times. This methodology is similar to the current shared parking provisions in Section 25.16.03.h.6 (see Attachment 1). In essence, the parking is based on the differing demand of different types of uses and their peak usage periods. Office/employment uses have their highest demand during the work day, whereas residential and entertainment parking has the higher demand in the evening.

In adopting the revised zoning ordinance in 2008, the Mayor and Council made some decisions on the provision of parking in the higher density mixed-use zones (MXTD and MXCD; see Attachment F). Section 25.16.03.f establishes a maximum parking limit in those two zones. In effect, the minimum off-street parking standard set forth in the parking tables is also the maximum number of spaces allowed unless one of the four following exceptions is met:

- The added parking is a permeable surface
- The added parking is provided in an automated structure or is provided above or below grade
- The parking is in connection with a ride-sharing program
- All of the public use space requirement is provided on-site

This is intended to encourage reductions in the amount of parking spaces provided.

The Mayor and Council or the Planning Commission have flexibility to lower the parking requirement as part of the consideration of a project plan or site plan application if certain conditions are met such as proximity to rail stations, bus routes, and public parking facilities. This includes an allowance to approve parking reductions for multi-family projects. This provision was inserted based on recent trends of building new residential projects with reduced on-site parking, especially in high transit service areas. Attachment 3 provides a summary of the current parking standards for uses in the Town Center area,

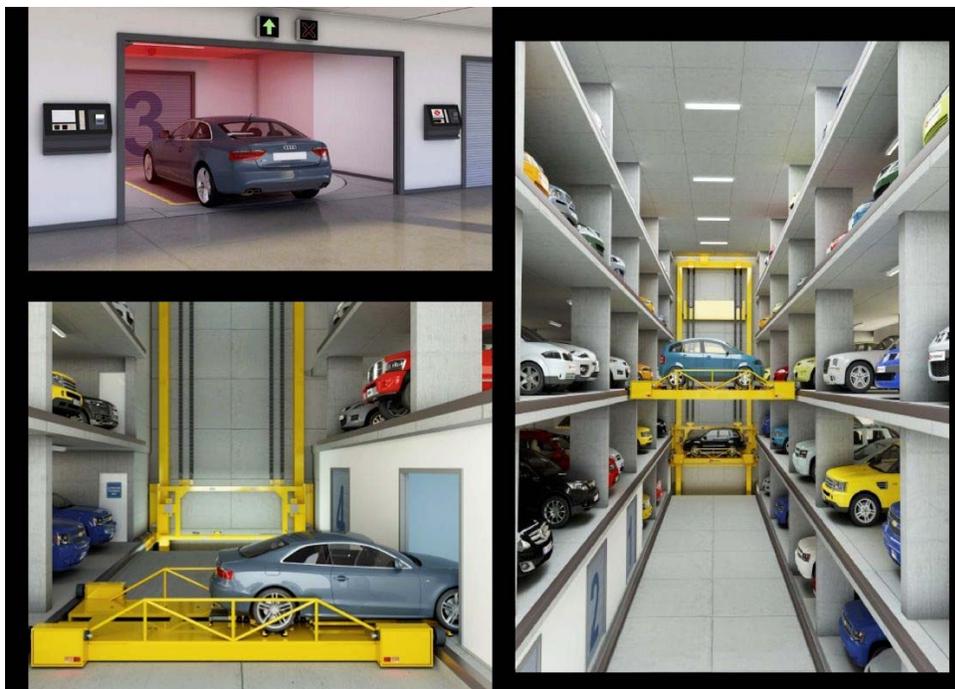
along with the provisions for maximum parking limits, parking flexibility, and shared parking.

The code also includes a provision that allows for the deferral of providing the normal full parking requirement where the nature of the use demonstrates that the full requirement does not have to be met. However, there must be sufficient land area available to provide the full parking complement should the nature of the use change in the future.

Automated Parking Structures

The revised code also allows for the use of automated parking structures as a way to provide required parking in a much more space-efficient way. Section 25.16.08 reads as follows:

Automated parking structures may be used to meet all or a portion of the required off-street parking requirements. Such structures may be freestanding or used in conjunction with parking garages. If freestanding, they must be located only in the rear yard, and screened from adjoining properties with landscaping, wall, or other means, and comply with all noise standards.



Automated parking structure –
Condominium in
Miami, FL

These facilities take a vehicle, place it on an elevator/conveyor, and move it automatically into a free stall within the facility. The patron returns with a ticket, has it read, and has his/her car back in a couple of minutes, usually much faster than a valet service.

Automated garages have been popular in other parts of the world. They have the advantage of being able to accommodate about twice as many vehicles as a conventional parking garage.

Conventional parking garage designs with better lighting and maneuvering spaces have helped allay the trepidation some drivers have had in using these structures. New electronic systems that identify how many spaces are available on each level and which spaces are empty have also served to make parking structures more inviting.

Performance Parking

The rationale behind performance parking is to set meter prices in prime blocks such that during peak usage periods there will normally be a few empty spaces because some users won't pay the higher price. They will elect to park on other streets, perhaps a block or two away, that have more spaces available and at a lower price. This might also be combined with the removal of time limits on the meters. This is especially useful in the evening hours when patrons of the restaurants, theaters, or other venues don't want to be constrained by one or two-hour time limits.

There is a fair amount of work involved to set up such a system. The meter rates need to be monitored and adjusted such that a desired utilization is achieved. San Francisco has a pilot program which set a goal of 85 percent utilization along the prime blocks. The demand pricing policy decouples parking demand from parking revenues.

Valet Parking

Privately operated valet parking is another strategy in high-density areas. Attractions in the entertainment districts use valet parking frequently. It may cost more than a garage, especially including a driver tip, but for many users the convenience of front-door service outweighs the cost. Some businesses make it more attractive by providing validation for free parking for the first hour or two as well. The costs are driven primarily by labor and the cost of rental of the off-site lots if not owned by the user.

Non-Parking Options

With advances in modern communications technology, on-demand circulation in downtowns can be provided by Uber or Lyft-type services. The user can view the location of service drivers on their phone app, call for service and pay via the app. This type of service gets the riders where they want to go without waiting for some form of circulator bus on a fixed route. With this type of service, the user can either ride to downtown on transit or park outside of the Central Business District (CBD) or still get where they want to go more quickly and conveniently.

Looking further ahead, this type of on-demand service could be provided by automated vehicles. This would reduce the overhead costs of paying drivers as part of the service.

Principal Sources:

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Downtown Idea Exchange newsletter – Emerging Technologies Continue to Impact Transit, Parking, January 2016 edition.
Zoning Practice booklet, APA – Practice Smart Parking, Issue 1, January 2006