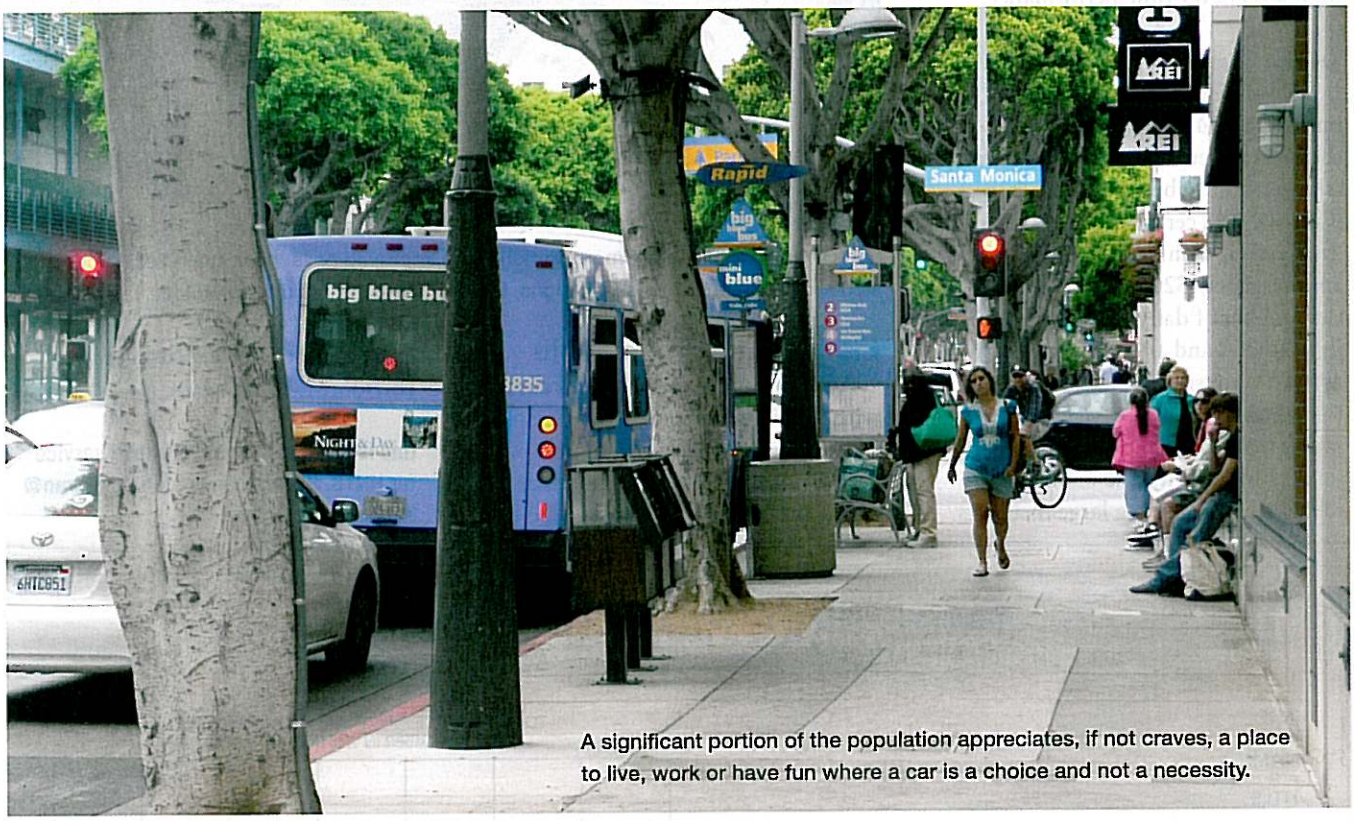
Steffen Turoff, AICP

Recipe for SUCCESS

Parking can be the frosting or the fly in the city-planning cake



A significant portion of the population appreciates, if not craves, a place to live, work or have fun where a car is a choice and not a necessity.

In recent years, planners and leaders in cities across the country have attempted to revitalize their downtowns by giving them complete-streets or new-urbanist makeovers.

These planning approaches offer the promise of greater balance between vehicles, pedestrians, bicycles and transit use. The reason for implementing such policies can be compelling. Planning and engineering policies in the last half of the 20th century have facilitated automobile travel but have often, inadvertently, made taking a trip within our cities, towns and rural areas by any mode other than the automobile unpleasant or challenging at best, dangerous or an impossibility at worst. In many places, even for a short trip, the absurdity of "you can't get there from here" is true, unless you are traveling by car.

Democracy, the free market and a transportation system that properly serves the public are all based on the availability of choices. Yet when it comes to most short trips in many American cities, the existing infrastructure favors or demands travel by car. I recall picking up visiting family members at their hotel to have them watch my daughter's swimming class. After a more-than-10-minute drive, we reached the swim school, only to realize that the school was located just across a six-lane arterial—with no crosswalk nearby—from the hotel.

While much of the complete-streets focus has been the needs of aging baby boomers and millennials, who are refraining from buying cars or obtaining driver's licenses in surprising numbers, a significant portion of the population appreciates, if not craves, a place to live, work or have fun where a car is a choice and not a necessity. In his book "Walkable Cities," Jeff Speck argued that the desire for such neighborhoods has made their creation or restoration a necessity for cities wishing to remain competitive in the quest for companies and employees in the information age.

Yet, despite their importance and the grand plans they generate, complete-

streets makeovers can easily fail because cities do not pay adequate (or any) attention to parking planning. Parking is often treated as an afterthought throughout the process, or worse, handed off to transportation or other engineers and planners who have no specialized expertise or experience in parking planning.

In many or most complete-streets efforts, some parking spaces will need to be relocated or even eliminated. However, parking is an essential element of any urban-planning project and needs to be addressed from the very beginning of the process by qualified parking planners. Just because the number of parking spaces is reduced, parking does not become unimportant. On the contrary, fewer parking spaces require a higher—not lower—level of analysis and attention to parking, if they are to be properly utilized.

Parking is a valuable resource for cities and in many ways the lynchpin of complete streets.

Urban planning is like any other complex process. There are many parts that need to be integrated. It is not enough to use most of the ingredients when one bakes a cake. You need to use them all if you want it to be edible. So it is with parking and downtown planning.

Gather all ingredients

I like the law of diminishing marginal utility, which sounds simultaneously daunting and mundane, because it is often useful in many aspects of parking planning. This is particularly true in a complete-streets environment.

Marginal utility says that the first unit of a good offers a consumer the greatest utility or value. Think of a hungry person and how valuable one slice of pizza would be to that individual. However, each additional slice has less value to the increasingly satiated person. While the person may be willing to pay, for example, $6 for that first slice when the person is nearly starving, a fourth slice might barely be worth $2. And by the sixth slice, not only would the person no longer be willing to pay anything, he or she might be willing to pay not to have to eat it.

What does the law of marginal utility mean for parking planning for complete streets? Many things, but first, the fewer the spaces we have, the more valuable each one is. The more valuable a space is, the more it justifies a higher price charged and/or greater restrictions to ensure that as many people get to use the space as possible.

While traffic engineering may require increasing lanes or other infrastructural improvements to increase or maximize throughput, parking spaces require turnover. One visitor space located in a prime location and turning over hourly is worth more than eight spaces with cars parked all day. So if we have fewer but more valuable spaces per the law of marginal utility, we want them to turn over. The best situation we can experience is to have spaces that are nearly but not entirely full (we want some capacity so drivers can find spaces) in prime locations, turning over frequently.

Unfortunately, many cities do not treat parking planning as the distinct yet equally important element of urban planning that it is when undertaking complete-streets, new-urbanist or other projects with similar characteristics. Out of expediency, cities may turn to their in-house engineers or engineering departments to handle parking planning.

Though many cities treat it as such, parking planning usually does not require a civil or even a traffic-engineering approach. Since their frame of reference revolves around streets and traffic, many city engineers assume that parking can be treated as an extension of the trip and they focus on trip generation. Conversely, the focus may be on minimum parking requirements, which out of frustration over their sometimes inaccuracy or arbitrariness, are being hacked away with a planning or engineering blunt instrument.

Complete-streets makeovers can easily fail because cities do not pay adequate (or any) attention to parking planning.

Most importantly, when cities make parking-planning decisions based on a borrowed one-size-fits-all formula, they sacrifice an enormously powerful planning tool that can play a vital role in influencing transportation behavior and the associated economic and aesthetic development of their downtowns. Flexibility is key and regulating turnover tends to be a more flexible policy than building spaces.

One dozen spaces

Parking is an extraordinarily valuable resource for cities and towns as a source of revenue, economic-development tool, enhancer of quality of life for residents, and in many ways the lynchpin determinant of mode share . . . and complete streets, if it is managed properly. To fully realize the value of parking, city planners need to address a number of essential questions: How much parking should be offered? Where should it be located? How much should it cost and/or what kind of restrictions should be place on parking spaces? How much can or should the city be willing to spend to provide parking for the public?

These are vital issues for any community, but they are particularly important for communities undertaking complete-streets or new-urbanist

development in the effort to provide more balance, de-emphasizing vehicles and encouraging visitors and residents to walk or use bicycles—and the economic, aesthetic and environmental benefits associated with these policies.

Mismanaged parking often undermines these planning goals by actually increasing traffic, either through congestion due to smaller streets or people driving more, "cruising," in search of an elusive parking space. It is not unusual to see scores of drivers circling downtown streets looking for open parking and waiting for new spaces to open up. These problems can be exacerbated or solved by a complete-streets approach to planning, but can only be properly addressed through parking planning.

Many cities should provide less parking in downtown areas, at least in communities that suffer from extreme congestion or in which planners want to promote pedestrian traffic.

One cup targeting

The place to start is the identification and prioritization of different parking users, usually by length of stay. One then must determine how much parking can and should be allocated to each user group, where that parking should be located and the price charged or restriction applied to turn over parking spaces in the desired manner. For decades, the prevailing thinking was that planners should create as much parking as is needed to meet demand, all in a specific location.

In the past decade, studies have demonstrated that visitors' inability to find a parking space is often not the result of too few spaces but rather counterproductive policies regarding parking pricing and regulations. Many cities should actually be providing less parking in downtown areas, at least in communities that suffer from extreme congestion or in which planners want to promote pedestrian traffic.

But city planners and civic leaders are often hesitant to reduce minimum-parking requirements at first. Reducing the number of spaces required appears to fly in the face of reason when people have trouble finding parking spaces. And it is a dramatic change from how things have been done in the past. However, by reducing parking in congested areas but increasing the number of spaces in adjacent areas, planners can reduce downtown congestion, and increase the number of destinations in their city cores, while providing the necessary parking close by to meet demand.

Ultimately, decisions on where to locate parking should be based on the results of a parking survey, through which parking planners quantify and evaluate the parking patterns and needs of current and future users of parking in each location. The answer to "Do we have a parking shortage?" and "How much parking do we need?" can't be found with a code calculation or statistics. How much you need depends on the radius you are willing to consider and how much you are willing to charge to make use of that radius.

Turnover to taste

Once the number of spaces and the location of those spaces is determined, urban planners and their parking consultants need to determine which parking users spaces should be serving. The conclusion of this analysis then leads to a determination of the desired level of turnover and subsequently how much parking should cost to the end user in order to generate the desired level of turnover, essentially how long parkers should be permitted to use individual spaces. Parking pricing and careful time restrictions, not simply building more spaces, can be the most powerful and effective tool in a city's toolbox when it comes to parking planning, even providing an adequate amount of parking.

To ensure that the rates continue to reflect parking demand, parking occupancies should be evaluated and the rate charged adjusted higher or lower as is needed to manage driver behavior in a manner that supports the city's ultimate planning goals (i.e., promote complete streets or support local businesses). The driving public is increasingly accepting of such policies, as their willingness to pay a fee to park exceeds their frustration over not being able to find a parking space.

Ultimately, communities must look at their parking as a valuable resource to be managed, rather than a necessary evil to be put up with or gutted (or ignored altogether). If properly handled, parking planning can be a powerful tool for supporting planning approaches like complete streets and new urbanism or more traditional goals like supporting local business development and improving local residents' quality of life. **TM&E**

Turoff is the director of planning studies at Walker Parking Consultants. He can be reached at steffen.turoff@walkerparking.com.