

Free parking is so 20th century

By Lois Levin/Guest Columnist

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For half a century, our government has been building more and wider roads, subsidizing the manufacture of cars, and has created more and more space for parking those cars at curbside and in municipal parking lots. Today there are almost four parking spaces for every car in the U.S. – put them altogether and you'd have a parking lot the size of Connecticut. According to Professor David Shoup in "The High Cost of Free Parking," 99 percent of those spaces are "free." Or are they?

Ample "free" parking reinforces our reliance on automobiles and discourages the use of public transportation, walking and bicycling. How many times have you just grabbed the car keys when you are sure that you can park at your destination at little or no cost? Sure, we often waste time and fuel cruising around to find a space, but how victorious we feel when we find one!

We pay a big price for this convenience. Daily traffic congestion has become the norm. Parked cars line most streets. The pavement required for all those parked cars displaces trees and landscaping, narrows sidewalks, limits the option for plazas and outdoor seating and seriously compromises the aesthetics of our urban landscape. Impermeable pavement adds to stormwater runoff, which depletes groundwater, contaminates the local streams and rivers with pollutants, and creates land erosion. And pavement retains heat, creating a heat island effect that contributes to the problem of global warming.

"Free parking" is not really free; taxpayers and businesses spend billions of dollars a year building and maintaining roads and creating parking lots. Local ordinances typically require new development to provide a "minimum" number of new parking spaces, but those minimums are often set to ensure that no car will ever have to park on the street. Municipalities build parking lots, install parking meters and hire parking officers in order to generate revenue from parked cars, but that revenue covers only a fraction of the cost of creating those spaces in the first place.

Although it is a common complaint that there are "not enough parking spaces," more than half of all parking spaces in the U.S. are vacant two-fifths of the time during business hours, according to the Urban Land Institute. That may seem irrelevant to someone who cannot find a space in a particular location at a specific moment in time. But there are other options to grabbing the car keys. We have grown accustomed to viewing free or subsidized parking as a part of the landscape, a basic right, especially in suburban towns and small cities such as ours. We put up with streets that are dominated by parked cars when we could instead be expanding public transportation and creating bicycle- and pedestrian- friendly neighborhoods and business centers.

Policy could be oriented to encouraging the manufacture of trains, buses, light rail, bicycles, pedicabs and other types of efficient transport, all of which reduce demand for parking. That would also save some of the millions of lives, including the lives of many pedestrians and bicyclists, caused by automobile accidents each year.

Newton will be a more attractive, healthy and environmentally-responsible city, with more lively and appealing village centers, when we can agree to resist the pressure to add more parking spaces and work instead to extend and increase MBTA service, create on street bike lanes, offer incentives for car-pooling, develop car-sharing and bike-sharing programs, and build separated bicycle and walking paths.

Lois Levin is president of Bike Newton, which can be found at www.bikenewton.org.

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