

# Introduction...



**A**utomobiles are a fact of American life. For virtually all but the most “senior” of our citizens, life has always included an automobile — or two or three. Driving a car is a cultural rite of passage for every 16-year-old boy and girl. The first car we buy is a major symbol of economic independence; the first new car is the mark of economic arrival. Unfortunately, automobiles are also part of the problem for America’s older commercial areas.

America’s classic Main Streets are social and economic organisms that require patronage — the patronage of the residents who live there; the patronage of the employees and employers who work there; and the patronage of the people who come there to do business, shop and find entertainment. Virtually every one of these human activities involves the use of the automobile. To remain viable, downtowns must be able to accommodate the auto.

In literally every one of the hundreds of small towns we have visited and worked with, parking is seen as either the single biggest problem downtown or the “only solution” or *both!* And it’s no wonder why. Sprawl — the predominant American development strategy since World War II — is predicated on the construction of overly ample parking. In fact, according to the Urban Land Institute, the standards for determining the number of parking spaces required for a typical suburban shopping center are based on the amount of parking needed during the 20th busiest shopping hour of the year, which just happens to fall somewhere between Thanksgiving and Christmas! Therefore, the standard by which downtown leaders compare their districts is based upon peak capacity, leaving as much as half of the parking spaces unused for more than 40 percent of any given year!

So, where do small-town downtown advocates go for help? Highway development and the explosion of automobile ownership have helped create standards of suburban development, decentralized land use and traffic management — standards that will not work within traditional commercial districts. Downtowns simply are not built and do not function the same way as suburban developments.

## **What Is It That Makes Downtowns Different ... and Special?**

First, we need to make it clear: ***Downtowns are not going to go away.*** There are really only two outcomes for a community in dealing with its traditional commercial district: Either local leaders will get themselves organized to respond to the marketplace and the values of the community so that their downtown can thrive and develop, or they will ignore the realities of the situation and let the district founder, decline and decay. ***But, whatever they do, downtown won’t go away.*** Even that’s been tried before, with the Urban Clearance/Urban Renewal initiatives of the 1960s and ‘70s, and they didn’t make downtown go away. Urban renewal simply replaced downtown with a gaping, depressing eyesore that symbolized the community’s failure to take charge of its own destiny.

So, what is it about downtown that makes it special? What is it about this place that makes current parking standards wholly inappropriate?

- First, downtowns *predate the automobile*. Most were built for other forms of transportation — buses, trolleys, even horse and buggy. And even in towns developed during the auto age, the street widths, turning bays, speed limits and a host of other criteria developed “way back then” are not suitable for today’s automobiles or drivers.
- Second, downtowns are *compact*. Downtowns make efficient use of land, utilities and other forms of infrastructure. And they are also efficient for pedestrians — generally more efficient than the typical strip shopping center or regional mall. Eventually, no matter where we go, we have to get out of our cars and walk. Downtowns were built for walking; suburbia was not.
- Third, downtowns are *visual*. Most downtowns have a variety of architectural styles,

which give the place visual vitality. Buildings from different eras were constructed of different materials, giving the district texture: And downtowns are often designed in a way that blurs distinctions between open and interior space. The town square, the alleys between buildings, even the recessed entries in storefronts serve as open spaces that welcome people into the district and into its buildings.

- Fourth, downtowns encourage *interaction and community*. They provide places to gather, to linger, even to loiter. Downtowns are “people-watching” places. They allow you to interact with your past and to connect with other members of your town. This sense of community was considered an antiquated American value during the 1970s and ‘80s. But in the ‘90s, that sense of connection is becoming increasingly important again. Can the strip centers and shopping malls really provide it?

On their own, each of the four characteristics described above give ample reason to discard the sprawl-generated parking standards used in most communities. Taken together, these four characteristics scream out for a change in the way we assess, plan, develop and manage parking in older, traditional, valuable commercial districts.

### **Facts Are Facts**

But let’s face facts. The automobile is not going to go away any time soon. Not in our lifetime, nor in our children’s. Shopping patterns, business standards and preferences in entertainment are all built around mobility. Mass transit systems are all but extinct in small-size communities and grossly underutilized and undercapitalized in larger cities. And while some Americans are athletic and outgoing, most of us are pretty much “couch potatoes”; walking as a mode of transportation is rarely considered an attractive alternative.

The challenge is to find the balance between the realities of automobile ownership and use and the qualities of downtown’s built environment, qualities that are intrinsic to its future development. Parking should not drive development decisions; it should support them. And if the 14 years of Main Street experience mean anything at all, they clearly show that development should respect the qualities of the built environment and build upon them. *Therefore, parking strategies for downtown should be designed to support, not supplant, preservation-based revitalization activity.*

The solution to the “parking problem” in the older commercial district requires endorsement of three basic concepts:

1. You must know the existing supply of and demand for parking, and you must be able accurately to predict future parking demand, based upon your comprehensive revitalization strategy.
2. You must manipulate the future demand for parking to fit the structure, design and performance of downtown-both now and in the future.
3. You need to employ common sense and efficiency in devising the solutions to your parking problems. While evaluating and predicting demand and constructing new parking can seem technical, nine out of ten good, appropriate solutions to small-town parking issues are sensible, practical ideas, backed with facts.

### **Who Is This Handbook For?**

*The Parking Handbook for Small Communities* is:

- geared to communities under 50,000. That still allows us to cover a lot of territory and challenges you to extract what is right for your town, whether its population is 450 or 45,000.
- written for the non-parking professional. We’ve tried to keep technical jargon to a

minimum; what's important is that the handbook be useful to anyone who wants to take the initiative to find appropriate solutions to downtown parking problems. You will see examples from "big" cities. Don't discount them; we've selected examples that we believe can "translate" very well into the small-town context.

- oriented to getting more out of your existing parking before you try to develop new parking in the district. It just makes sense; once you know more about your community's parking supply, current demand and future parking projections, you will be able to increase the efficiency of what you already have. And sometimes that increased efficiency makes the difference between a parking "problem" and a successful parking "program."
- focused on practical, low-cost ways to increase the supply and/or performance of parking systems.
- filled with alternatives for parking regulation, promotion, financing and management-alternatives that respect the very different levels of resources available in smaller communities.
- organized to give you the steps required to take charge of parking in your downtown. This handbook is not a "fill-in-the-blanks" workbook. It offers a step-by-step method that can be employed by any downtown group to create sound parking development and management systems.

### **The Steps**

The chapters of this handbook are arranged as steps. Each represents a critical phase in the process of planning, developing and managing parking for small towns. Here's a preview of what you'll find:

**Step One: *Getting Organized*** — Most well-intentioned leaders in downtowns believe that parking is their #1 problem; then, they dive right in without knowing what they are dealing with, usually wasting a lot of time and money in the process. Step One sets the stage for all the hard, and productive, work to come.

**Step Two: *Gathering Data and Analyzing Demand*** — The best parking decisions can only be made with the most accurate information. This chapter not only outlines the steps in the data-gathering process, but also introduces you to the formulas necessary to ascertain current and future demand for parking in your town.

**Step Three: *Increasing the Effectiveness of Existing Parking*** — Once you know what you have and what you need, the first practical step is to make better use of your existing supply of parking. Step Three gives you a variety of ways to make your existing parking supply go further.

**Step Four: *Planning and Developing New Parking Facilities*** — Often, maximizing your existing supply of parking just isn't enough. Step Four gives you the details for developing new parking facilities, with special emphasis on the development of small parking lots.

**Step Five: *Promoting the Parking Program*** — Making sure that the public understands the parking system and uses it to its fullest potential is nearly as important as developing the system itself. Step Five provides valuable examples of ways that downtowns are successfully "selling" their parking system to their customers.

**Step Six: *Managing the Parking System*** — The job really begins after you have developed the parking you need. Selecting the right management system is just as important as selecting the right location for new parking. In fact, it's probably more important. Without management, the parking system just isn't a system.

**Step Seven: *Putting It Together... and Keeping It Together*** — *The Parking Handbook for Small Communities* concludes with a discussion of how you "sell" your program to local elected officials and the public; where to start with the implementation; and how to update your program periodically. Remember, the parking system is an organism, requiring its own brand of nourishment, control and guidance in order to thrive.

*The Parking Handbook for Small Communities* is the marriage of the experience of the National Trust's Main Street Center and the Institute of Transportation Engineers. And the match-maker is our author, John Edwards.

So, relax and take your time with *The Parking Handbook for Small Communities*. Take the steps one at a time and encourage as much local participation as possible as you proceed with each one. Remember, don't rush to solve your parking "problem" overnight. But don't give in to de facto, suburban-shopping-center parking solutions either. Read on, there is a system you can use to meet your needs and retain your downtown's character! — *Elizabeth Jackson, NMSC*