

Downtown Idea Exchange

Perspectives

Downtowns need to rethink the low-tech parking space and meter

by Paul Felt

A relic of downtown infrastructure that is becoming increasingly obsolete is the common parking space and meter.

Technology has progressed to the point where there is amazing opportunity here, and I believe the time is right for downtowns to start planning for what comes next.

Allow me to suggest three core ideas for modernizing on-street parking and payment systems, and adding some new functionality.

1. Equip on-street meters to accept payment via E-ZPass and other electronic toll collection systems. Electronic toll collection is a proven technology that frees toll traffic and speeds travel times on our nation's highways, freeways, bridges, and tunnels. It brings far greater efficiency than the days when the options were either exact change or a toll collector. In 14 states, E-ZPass users who pay a deposit for a transponder device and a nominal monthly fee

are rewarded with smoother journeys and saved gas. Now, bumper-to-bumper traffic lining up to pay a toll is usually only experienced by those luddites who still pay their tolls the old way.

Likewise, downtown motorists who could pay for parking automatically with their electronic toll collection (ETC) tags would be less frustrated by on-street parking and often-Byzantine parking rules and regulations. The ETC-equipped meter could scan adjacent parking spaces at periodic intervals, and only charge people for the time they actually use. People wouldn't have to worry about carrying quarters, guessing how long they'll be parked, or not knowing or understanding when the metered parking is in effect.

ETC has already been implemented in urban garage and surface lot parking in Dallas, TX and Atlantic City, NJ, as well as many airports in the Northeast. It shouldn't be too hard to make it a feasible effortless payment sys-

tem for single-space street parking as well.

2. Use meters as portals to sell and distribute electricity as a fuel source. The less oil-dependent future of the automobile is starting to take shape, notably with the 2011 Chevrolet Volt, and the zero-emission Nissan Leaf Electric Car. These green vehicles are ideal for downtowns, but for the fact that publicly accessible plug-in power is hard to come by in an outdoor, downtown setting. It's hard enough to find a place to plug in your cell phone!

GM expects Volt buyers to install 240-volt electric line chargers in their home garages. And Nissan says that a home assessment will be part of the buying process for its Leaf. For the vast majority of downtown area residents, a market keenly aligned with this sort of vehicle, home charging units won't be a viable option.

Downtowns are the most sensible places I can imagine to locate quick-charge stations, which Nissan says will charge the Leaf battery to 80% in about 26 minutes. Public charging station infrastructure will definitely be a fast-growing need, throughout the country.

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Let's not keep people waiting a half hour at something that looks like a suburban gas station and convenience store. Why shouldn't municipalities leverage and help pay for upgrading and maintaining their downtown street infrastructure through good old capitalism — boldly embracing and investing in the next big thing ahead of everyone else?

At the very least, offering a quick charge from a metered space or parking lot would certainly be an incentive for more people to pay for parking without a second thought. And that half hour with nothing to do would be a great incentive to grab a bite to eat or try on a new pair of shoes. People have gotten used to receiving added value for their money and time spent in virtually everything else. Why not parking and refueling?

It makes perfect sense, and it's a golden opportunity for public-private partnerships between municipalities, automakers, and electric utility providers. The time to act is now. Our downtowns will gain far cleaner air and less noisy streets.

3. Use on-street meters to spread information on what's happening downtown. This one does not have to be as high-tech

and expensive as it sounds. A simple sticker and website tailored to smartphones, the next frontier of downtown marketing, will do the trick.

As we profile in this month's issue of *Downtown Promotion Reporter*, downtown Jacksonville has ingeniously placed such stickers on about 700 parking meters to promote its mobile website, dtjax.org.

Downtown Jacksonville's mobile website has a directory of all the restaurants and merchants in downtown, connects to Google Maps, and includes a current calendar of events. In other words, it provides timely and useful information to empower people to be better, more active users of downtown.

Traffic on the mobile website, about half-a-year-old, has increased about 200 percent since the "explore the more" campaign was launched. This is such a good idea that every downtown with something to promote (hopefully everyone reading this) ought to be doing it.

What information about downtown might parking spaces of the future also tell drivers? How about where parking spaces are available?! The amount of time we downtowners collectively spend hunting for parking spaces, wasting time and gas in the process, is a crime. Sometimes, real crimes

are even committed over parking spaces. San Francisco has caught on to this from a tragedy it experienced, and is testing technology by a company called Streetline, fitted to 6,000 of its 24,000 metered parking spaces, that involves a wireless sensor network to announce to drivers which of the spaces are free at any moment.

Eventually, our GPS-enabled smartphones will talk to these networks on the curbside, and guide us right to the nearest currently available on-street parking spaces!

Parking spaces of the future can also be outfitted with surveillance technology to deter and prosecute crime, and enhance traffic and pedestrian safety. A sensor network like the one being tested in San Francisco, for example, could monitor air quality as well as deploy noise sensors to detect everything from gunshots to accidents — very quickly and very precisely in terms of location and timing.

Just as downtown buildings thrive and generate vibrancy when they are used for multiple purposes, so too will downtown parking infrastructure and payment systems.

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