

Improving Downtown Transit & Parking

Final Draft – June 21, 2007

Recommendations from the Transit & Parking Advisory Committee

Committee Members & Staff

Downtown Merchants Group

- Marty Campbell - Buzzards CDs

Downtown Tacoma BIA

- Ted Johnson - Simon Johnson & Associates

Building Owners

- Bill Riley - Wm. Riley & Associates

Higher Education

- Steve Smith - University of WA Tacoma

Downtown Residents

- Bill Garl
- Holly Minniti

Major Employers

- Teri Sato - Russell Investments
- David Wrench - KeyBank

Small Businesses

- Steph Farber - LeRoy Jewelers
- Laura Nole - University BookStore

Builders

- Tom O'Connor - O'Connor & Associates

Appointed (Non-voting), representing the City of Tacoma

- Kurtis Kingsolver - Parking Enforcement
- Bruce Marshall - Parking Facilities
- Roxanne Murphy - Community Relations

Staff

- Paul Ellis - Tacoma-Pierce County Chamber

Overview

The Tacoma Pierce-County Chamber takes great interest in parking issues in downtown Tacoma, where many of its members are located and do business.

We believe that a well-designed parking & transit policy in downtown Tacoma can help to create and maintain a downtown which is inviting, attractive and functional. Similarly, a non-existent or poorly-designed parking & transit policy has the potential to make downtown difficult to use and visit, hampering efforts to sustain downtown's renewal.

In this white paper, we offer policy recommendations and suggest how stakeholders can most effectively be involved. The whole paradigm for transit and parking in urban areas is changing, and this paper explains how the new paradigm emerging globally can be applied locally to help our downtown build on past consensus and develop parking & transit policy that is both economically and environmentally sustainable.

We acknowledge and commend the outreach efforts by City Manager Eric Anderson, the Tacoma City Council and City staff in recent months in which members of the Chamber's Transit & Parking Committee and many other stakeholders have participated; this white paper is written as part of this collaborative process.

Nationally, transit & parking issues have received unprecedented academic attention during the past few years with the resulting accumulation of a body of "best practices" that can be extremely helpful to downtown leaders. Donald Shoup at the University of California Los Angeles has enumerated the best methodology for considering the economics of parking in his text ***The High Cost of Free Parking*** published in 2005 by the American Planning Association (APA). The APA has also published ***Parking Management Best Practices*** by Todd Litman, founder and executive director of the Victoria Transport Policy Institute. Lloyd Center Transportation Management Association director Rick Williams has also helped many downtown leaders across the Pacific Northwest—including ours—to better understand the complexities of transportation demand management. The Transit & Parking Advisory Committee has found these resources to be invaluable to our research.

History

Overall Strategy

In the mid-1990s, the City of Tacoma and its private sector partners in downtown's renaissance articulated the following consensus:

- Put customers and clients first
- Think systematically (coordinate on street parking, public & private garages, transit service & other alternatives)
- Monitor supply & demand
- Develop and market new services

Parking Advisory Committee

In 2006, downtown stakeholders formed a private 12-member group organized by the Chamber to represent them in implementing recommendations to the City of Tacoma on parking management matters.

To date, we believe that we have completed work on nine of the ten recommendations. With the help of City staff and the blessing of the Tacoma City Council, our collective efforts have produced some real results, including:

- The Transit & Parking Advisory Committee—a broad-based balanced combination of staff and parking stakeholders—has been created as envisioned in the recommendations;
- The City is abiding by commitments made in 2001 regarding completion of parking expansion projects and has defined the trigger criteria for development of expansion capacity;
- A vendor has been selected for renovation of Park Plaza South and addition of two additional levels of parking, pending authorization by the Tacoma City Council later this month;
- The City has hired a full complement of parking enforcement officers and put them on the streets;
- Handheld enforcement devices have been deployed and stepped-up enforcement has (at least for the time being) opened many new on street parking spaces for customers and clients;
- On-street enforcement and revenue collection have been operationally integrated with parking facility operations;

- Electronic citation data transfers to the court via the new hand-held parking system has reduced data errors and increased staff efficiency;
- Communication between City interests and stakeholder concerns are helping to improve responsiveness and support.

Next Steps

- Work with stakeholders to reach a consensus regarding implementation of metering

A previously unprecedented level of dialog between private stakeholders and City of Tacoma staff and elected leaders has built the foundation for a new, broad-based planning effort around transit & parking issues. This breadth of involvement will be needed to address the complexity—likened to that arcane puzzle, the Rubik’s Cube—of transit & parking issues.

New Paradigm

The evolution of urban areas during the past two decades and the impact of the New Urbanism on planning is bringing about a paradigm shift in how most downtowns view transit & parking. Established “best practices” today incorporate ten general principles to help guide planning decisions that most effectively support management of transit & parking services:

1. **Consumer choice:** People should have a variety of parking and travel options from which to choose.
2. **User information:** Motorists should have information on their parking and travel options.
3. **Sharing:** Parking facilities should serve multiple users and destinations.
4. **Efficient utilization:** Parking facilities should be sized and managed so spaces are frequently occupied.
5. **Flexibility:** Parking plans should accommodate uncertainty and change.
6. **Prioritization:** The most desirable spaces should be managed to favor higher-priority users [e.g., customer, clients and visitors].
7. **Pricing:** As much as possible, users should pay directly for the parking facilities they use.
8. **Peak management:** Special efforts should be made to deal with peak demand.
9. **Quality versus quantity:** Parking facility quality should be considered as important as quantity, including convenience, comfort, aesthetics, and security.
10. **Comprehensive analysis:** All significant costs and benefits should be considered in parking planning.

Aligning planning with this new paradigm is the first step in developing an integrated transit & parking system that will efficiently move people through and around downtown Tacoma.

General Recommendations for Parking & Transit Policy

The Chamber believes that the overall goal of Tacoma's transit & parking policy should be to support visiting, working, entertainment, shopping, and living in a vibrant downtown. A revitalized downtown with low storefront vacancy will make for an attractive downtown with successful businesses, generating additional revenue for local government and improving the overall quality of life for all Tacoma's citizens.

Parking & transit policy should encourage people to visit downtown, reduce negative impacts such as traffic congestion, moving to evade, and cruising for parking spaces, and provide readily available on-street parking spaces for customers and clients. Parking & transit policy should also encourage a densely developed, pedestrian-friendly downtown that facilitates infill and adaptive reuse.

Overall recognition of these goals will enable the City of Tacoma to secure far more revenue in the long run to operate, maintain and expand the system than a policy that focuses only on short-term revenue for that system. Realizing these goals will require consistent, robust communication with stakeholders—the users of transit & parking services downtown, as well as equally strong communication between agencies and between City departments.

The following recommendations have been identified by the Chamber as areas for further exploration by the City of Tacoma, transit agencies, and downtown stakeholders:

Maximize efficiency of current transit & parking operations

- Work to enhance interagency cooperation to maximize efficiency of transit & parking, as well as to maximize coordination between modes
- Utilize and publicize benchmarking/comparative analysis to measure costs and performance to similar operations
- Define—and finance—a comprehensive facility maintenance program
- Incorporate CPTED into facility design & explore partnering with the BIA to enhance facility security

Create a strong transit & parking system business plan

- Ensure that the system's financial expectations as a self-supporting revenue center are well-defined and understood
- Align transit & parking revenues with the mission and goals of the system
- Develop a consolidated parking financial statement that reports all revenues and expenses
- Integrate transportation demand management into system planning & operations
- Investigate "in lieu" fees as a new source for transit & parking revenues
- Expand hours of operation in City-owned garages as auto-cashier units allow fee collection when staffing is not cost effective

Enhance communications about the transit & parking system

- Institute a “Parking & Transit Roundtable” to foster regular communication among parking facilities managers, parking enforcement personnel, Commute Trip Reduction specialists, transit agencies, security providers and others—and include stakeholders
- Develop and publicize a comprehensive mission statement, goals and strategies for the downtown parking & transit system
- Develop a consistent parking & transit brand—then employ consistent images/messages to promote it
- Improve signage both into and within parking structures and lots—make transit & parking part of a comprehensive wayfinding system
- Produce an annual report reviewing system operations and financial performance
- Maintain an online presence providing parking information, including “on demand” resources for clients, customers and visitors

Implement new technology—and use it effectively

- Deploy a comprehensive and integrated parking access and revenue control system
- Improve efficiency and reduce costs through implementation of new technologies
- Develop seamless, customer-friendly payment options—i.e., Internet payment

Institute a “customer care” program

- Develop performance measures and tie them to company/employee incentives
- Create and deploy parking services in public garages—battery jumps, lock-out service, flat tire inflation, escort services, audio book rental, etc.
- Conduct regular customer surveys to assess satisfaction/potential enhancements
- Implement a “secret shopper” program to evaluate customer service
- Direct employee hiring and training to result in friendly, attentive, outgoing attendants—expand the “downtown ambassador” cadre

Provide flexibility to respond to special events and changing needs

- Develop and implement a residential permit program—exploring ways to facilitate shared use of facilities where feasible
- Develop—and publish—a special events policy
- Implement incentives for stakeholders—and other City departments—to communicate with parking personnel about special events
- Maintain a calendar of special events and assess potential transit & parking impacts

In addition, the Chamber offers recommendations for some specific policy “hot buttons” that have previously generated more heat than light in public discussion.

Recommendations for Parking & Transit “Hot Buttons”

Coordination & Collaboration

As downtown continues to grow and increase in development density, the City needs to maximize the effective deployment of transit services and other transportation alternatives, as well as to maximize coordination between transit services and parking operations. An effective downtown transportation plan should be developed that considers pedestrian, bicycle, carpool, vanpool, bus, rail, Flexcar and parking as coordinated elements of a strategic transportation system. The Chamber pledges its commitment and the cooperation of its members to developing and implementing such a plan.

The Chamber recently offered its support to the designation of downtown Tacoma as a Growth and Transportation Efficiency Center (GTEC); this designation by the Washington State Department of Transportation will support improved transportation efficiency and economic development. The Chamber will continue to work with the Commute Trip Reduction programs of both Tacoma and Pierce County to encourage participation from both large and small employers.

Parking Enforcement

According to Carl Walker Inc., a national consultant, the key to effective parking enforcement is attitude, consistency and fairness. “Best in Class operations have adopted the philosophy of being customer focused—not revenue or violator focused,” this consultant notes.

The Chamber’s previously-adopted policy (2003) is to encourage the City of Tacoma to more aggressively pursue enforcement against “chain” parking (now termed “moving to evade”) while at the same time encouraging broader support for use of transit and other commute alternatives by employees of member firms in the downtown Tacoma area. A more robust, employer-based transportation demand management (TDM) program should be pursued to provide effective, customer focused alternatives to parking.

Meters—Charging for On-Street Parking

The Chamber believes that selectively deploying pay stations or other forms of on-street metering has merit for “inventory control” purposes as well as for establishing a stronger revenue package as security for bonding.

Charging the “right price” for on-street parking when demand is sufficiently high is beneficial; at the same time, the Chamber encourages the City of Tacoma to be cautious and not overcharge for on-street parking--doing so will hurt businesses and efforts to revitalize the downtown. Research by Donald Shoup and others indicates that when there is insufficient demand, on-street parking should remain free.

Because parking use is based entirely on supply and demand, charging for parking when there is insufficient demand will create an even greater on-street vacancy. “The purpose of right-priced curb parking is not to gouge drivers or to maximize revenue,” Donald Shoup advises, “Instead, the price is the lowest price that will avoid shortages.”

Traffic engineers usually recommend that about 15 percent of curb space--one space every seven--should remain vacant to ensure easy ingress and egress; hence, Shoup observes that “parking should be free when occupancy is less than 85 percent at zero price...”

Previous monitoring indicates that downtown Tacoma in many blocks has a vacancy rate below this recommended level. The south portion of Pacific Ave. in front of the UWT and the 1100 block of Broadway may currently have sufficient demand for parking to justify charging for parking to benefit the area; however, they would have to have a consistent occupancy significantly above 85 percent as the “correct price” for parking.

In the few areas that have sufficient demand consistently with an occupancy significantly above 85 percent, the City could install parking meters and begin charging a very minimal amount. Each month, the City could raise the cost until the occupancy close to 85 percent and continue to monitor metered areas, reducing or removing meters when the occupancy falls below 85 percent.

Expenditure of Funds Gathered from On-Street Metering

The City of Tacoma should direct the funds gathered from metering in a distinct neighborhood or subarea of downtown into amenities that will benefit that specific neighborhood.

To set the parking rates appropriately pursuant to the demand for on-street parking, the City needs to avoid promising the revenue to debt obligation. The Chamber suggests that if funds collected for on-street are placed into the general fund, the public will see the parking fees as little more than another municipal tax, undermining the ability to charge market rate fees for parking.

A clearly-related public improvement such as a streetcar line and/or streetscape improvements would be preferred venues for expenditure of funds earned in excess of the real costs of operating the metering system. The Chamber recommends that a stakeholder group be formed or tasked to direct the investment of these funds in the local neighborhood.

Removal of Off-Street Parking Required for New Construction

“Off-street parking requirements especially harm the CBD,” Donald Shoup contends. “High density is a prime advantage of the CBD because it offers proximity to many social cultural and economic activities,” he concludes.

West Coast cities such as Portland, Seattle, Olympia, Bellingham and San Francisco have heeded this recommendation and have removed their off-street parking requirement; Tacoma may need to update its municipal code accordingly. The current downtown code—Destination Downtown—dramatically reduced parking requirements. Removing the off-street parking requirement may allow developers the flexibility to build the amount of parking that the market requires. This step should only be considered, however, within the context of a more robust transportation demand management program than currently exists. Such a program will obviate the practical need for more parking, a factor which continues to drive development today.