

Center for City Park Excellence



PAVEMENT IN THE PARK

The Parking Problem in City Parks

by Peter Harnik, Ben Welle, and Heather Hortie

Do you park in your park? Does it seem to be a parking lot more than a park, a lot?

Can one even write on this topic without getting tangled by the clashing meanings of the same word?

Urban park advocates struggle mightily to create new green space through a precious parcel here and an irreplaceable acre there. But a large swath of existing parkland is given over to the prosaic task of automobile storage, complete with its side impacts – impermeable surface, water runoff and erosion, oil and gas drippings, heat island effect, displacement of trees and meadows, loss of playing area.

A study by the Center for City Park

Excellence of 70 major city parks in the U.S. reveals that, collectively, they devote a total of 529 acres to the very technology that many people seek to escape when they head into their local patch of nature. That's an area larger than Schenley Park in Pittsburgh, City Park in Denver, Lake Harriet Park in Minneapolis or Franklin Park in Boston.

In Chicago, which recently spent \$475 million to create 24-acre Millennium Park, almost twice that much land – 46 acres – is given over to auto storage within nearby Lincoln Park.

On average CCPE found that signature urban parks provide slightly more than one auto space for every acre of parkland. The range is from almost zero spaces in

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conserves land for people to enjoy
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ensuring livable communities
for generations to come.*

Brooklyn's Prospect Park to a whopping 7,707 in San Diego's Mission Bay Park and 7,800 in St. Louis's Forest Park.

Storing an unused car requires approximately 330 square feet (.008 acres), according to Donald Shoup, professor of Urban Planning at University of California at Los Angeles and author of *The High Cost of Free Parking*. This factors in the actual surface area of the auto plus the extra space for aisles required to maneuver in and out of an enclosure. For a 500-car lot, that comes to four acres.

Of course, Americans assume they have the right to drive, one person per car, from home to a space directly next to a tennis court, rose garden or picnic table – at least until it's pointed out that 100 percent auto access means zero percent park. Despite the assumption, auto storage doesn't correlate directly with visitation. Parks aren't like shopping centers with a required number of spaces per unit of retail. The nation's most heavily-used park, Central Park in New York, has only 130 parking spaces yet gets 25 million visits per year. Prospect Park in Brooklyn, N.Y. receives six million visits while providing only 40 spaces for skaters at Wollman Rink – and that lot is open only periodically. On the other hand, in Houston, about 15 of Hermann Park's 445 acres are devoted to 2000 spaces for automobile storage (about 4.5 spaces per acre).

"On about 50 days per year there is no possible way to meet the demand, and on another 50 we're right at the limit for capacity," says Rick Dewees, administrator of the park. Nevertheless, he points out, "It's hard to add spaces when the lots are empty three-fourths of the time." (Interestingly, though it gets about 2.3 million visits per year, Hermann is less heavily used than Riverside Park in New York, which has almost no auto storage.) Dewees has been forced to become a bit thick-skinned about the issue: "You're always going to have people complaining there isn't enough parking during peak

times," he says.

Not every park is held hostage by the automobile. Parks surrounded by low-density housing with little or no mass transportation and filled with high-intensity sports facilities are under relentless pressure to provide large amounts of space for cars. Parks with many people living or working in close proximity and a range of good transit options nearby are able to succeed with little or no car storage. Nevertheless, battles over where to store cars rage in parks coast to coast. Two of the more instructive have taken place in Piedmont Park, Atlanta, and Golden Gate Park, San Francisco.

Of the nation's big-city signature parks, Piedmont Park is relatively small, making an internal auto repository particularly undesirable. There is one open-air lot, but no curbside spaces, since the city closed all Piedmont's internal roadways to cars in 1982. The park is fairly well-served by transit, but overflow autos end up in the surrounding neighborhood, which is wealthy, organized, outspoken and unhappy about the traffic. Also in Piedmont Park is the Atlanta Botanical Garden which has the same automobile problem but a bit more financial wherewithal to do something about it. The Garden's original proposal to construct a multi-level garage in an underused portion of the park generated shock and opposition, but gradually a broad compromise was crafted. The 800-car garage will be built relatively inconspicuously into a steep, wooded hillside and will serve both Botanical Garden visitors and Piedmont Park users (with the Garden covering the costs of construction and operation). In return, the Piedmont Park Conservancy will remove the existing open-air lot and also add more park entrances for walkers and cyclists. The expected \$1.75 per hour price for a car will undoubtedly come as a jolt to auto-oriented Atlantans, but if other great parks are an example, it should not reduce attendance. Some users will mitigate the cost by carpooling, others will shift modes to foot,

bicycle, subway or bus; most will simply pay the car storage cost, recognizing that the park experience is worth it. (It doesn't hurt that Piedmont Park is in the midst of a multi-year, multi-million-dollar upgrade that is raising it to the status of top tier urban park.)

In San Francisco, Golden Gate Park (not to be confused with Golden Gate National Recreation Area, which is largely outside the city) is a 1,017-acre pleasure ground of forests, ponds, meadows, gardens – and 28.5 acres of storage space for 3,760 cars. One reason for all cars is the DeYoung art museum, located in the park. When the venerable museum needed a massive renovation in the 1990s, the board actually explored moving the collection to a more transit-accessible location downtown. But some San Franciscans couldn't imagine the park without the museum and raised an outcry.

Meanwhile, bicyclists and conservationists were adamant that if the De Young stayed there would have to be a reduction of automobile asphalt. After much wrangling, a compromise was reached – the DeYoung would remain, a public-private consortium would construct an 800-space underground garage, and the city would remove an equivalent number of spaces from the park's surface.

It took two lawsuits and seven years, but in 2005 the \$55-million garage opened, funded by private contributions to the nonprofit Music Concourse Community Partnership and built by the public Golden Gate Park Concourse Authority. Abiding by the agreement, 837 surface auto spaces (worth about six-and-a-half acres) were then eliminated. (Using the garage, incidentally, costs \$2.50 per hour, \$3 on week-ends.)

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There are four ways to reduce the problem of car storage in city parks. One involves an economic stick, three involve structural

carrots. Naturally, none of them is painless.

By far the simplest and most effective response is to charge a fee. Storing a car in a park is a service that has value to the user. Doing so also places many human and environmental costs on the park system. With an equation like that, a payment should work. Unfortunately, two deep-seated cultures are in conflict on this issue – the underlying commitment to capitalism versus the common expectation of free city services. And if something is free for me, then I assume it's free for my car, too, right?

Most of the high-population-density cities don't try to meet the auto demand, relying on residents to walk, use transit or bikes, or pay to use private garages nearby. Most of the low-density cities don't challenge the car culture and don't necessarily get enough usership in any one park for it to be a problem. It is in the mid-density cities that the issue often comes to a head.

Minneapolis has taken the lead in charging for cars, probably because it has an independent park and recreation board that can set its own fees and is less constrained by normal city council politics. After a failed 10-year experiment with an honor system in the busiest of its 6 regional parks, the Park Board installed meters, and charges between 50 cents and \$1.25 per hour, depending upon demand. (The high end of the scale is for parks near downtown and near the University of Minnesota.) Because the Park Board receives all the meter revenue, it can determine how the money -- \$795,000 in 2005 -- is used. According to Don Siggelkow, a general manager with the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, some of the funds go for park maintenance and some for youth athletics. (Siggelkow also noted that the fee brings in a bit of revenue from suburbanites.) But recognizing the issue's volatility, the Park Board bends over backwards to make auto payments as light a

task as possible, offering an annual Patron Pass for \$27. Moreover, violators who are ticketed can ex post facto opt to avoid the fine by upgrading to one of the passes.

Pittsburgh's Schenley Park, located near the University of Pittsburgh, also has some meters, although the revenue flows to the city's general fund rather than to the park itself.

The flip side of the coin, of course, is to provide park users with transit options. Eight of the 10 most heavily used parks in American cities have subway or light-rail access within one-quarter mile, and all of them have bus service that comes even closer. Outside of New York City (whose parks almost invariably have subway service), among the parks best-served by rail are the Boston Common, Forest Park in St. Louis, and the National Mall in Washington, D.C..

Naturally, instituting transit service, especially rail, to major parks is expensive. But it is not out of the question. In Houston, the city's first light-rail line, opened in January, 2004, features two stops in Hermann Park. This outcome wasn't a given. Planners had known that they wanted to run the tracks between downtown and the Reliant Park stadium, but the intermediary route had many different possible alignments. "We lobbied hard to get service for the park," said Dewees, the superintendent, "and we consistently supported that alignment through the planning process. Now we see quite a few people using rail to get here."

Conversely, in Chicago, when the Chicago Transit Authority proposed eliminating service on its Green Line elevated train, a broad coalition of community leaders, including Eunita Rushing of the Garfield Park Conservatory Conservancy, rose up in opposition, claiming in part that the shutdown would negatively affect people's ability to get to the park and would also add cars to the neighborhood.

At Washington Park in Portland, Ore., home to the popular Rose and Japanese Gardens, cars and buses regularly exceed the auto storage capacity from May through September. The city, according to Park Manager Bob Stilson, is unwilling to add to the 86 spaces (though it is unwilling to charge for them, either). In response to the crunch, Tri-Met, the regional transit agency, has added a peak-season bus that shuttles between eight stops within the 130-acre park and the closest MAX light-rail stop. The service, which runs every 15 minutes and costs \$1.70 (or is free with a transfer) is aggressively advertised by the park department, Tri-Met and by event promoters. The route gets about 500 riders per day on weekends and 420 on weekdays.

Cars bring people to parks. But there is another way to increase access without autos: bring the parks to the people extend the reach of a park using trails and greenways as fingers into outlying neighborhoods. Greenways along creeks and waterfronts, as well as trails along abandoned rail corridors, serve as skinny parks on their own and they also allow users to walk, run, bike and rollerblade to major parks along the route. In Washington, D.C. the Capital Crescent Trail (built on a former railroad) enables thousands of residents and suburbanites to access both Rock Creek Park and the National Mall, neither of which provide more than minimal space for auto storage. And getting there becomes half the fun.

Once again, the standard is set by Minneapolis which has an interconnected park and parkway system, the Grand Rounds, that runs 49 miles through the city. It's possible to see and use virtually every regional park in the Minneapolis network by running or cycling (or skiing) on the Grand Rounds trails. "It's very easy, and it's done frequently," says Alex Zachary, a planning manager for the Minneapolis Park Board.

One city which has its eye on Minneapolis's crown is Atlanta which is in the process of creating the Beltline, a 22-mile, multi-billion-dollar trail-and-transit park completely encircling the downtown. The Beltline will link nine larger parks, including Piedmont Park, and is likely to completely remake downtown Atlanta, not only through the addition of bicycles but because the corridor is serving as a gigantic catalyst for a back-to-the-city movement of park-using residents and workers.

Which leads to the fourth way of reducing auto storage problems in parks: increasing population density nearby. The more people who live within walking distance of a park, the fewer need to drive and deal with their cars when they get there. Comparison in point: New York's Riverside Park and Fresno's Woodward Park. Both are approximately the same size (325 and 300 acres, respectively) but Riverside has only 120 parking spaces while Woodward has an astonishing 2,500. The difference is the surrounding neighborhoods. Riverside has the Hudson River on one side and a solid row of 12- and 16-story buildings on the other. And behind those buildings are many blocks alternating three-story brownstones with large apartment buildings. Woodward, in contrast, is bordered by single-family homes, most of which have lots large enough for pools, on cul-de-sac street layouts. The residential population density around Woodward is about 6.5 persons per acre, virtually guaranteeing heavy reliance on autos to get to the park. The density around Riverside Park is about 150 persons per acre, higher than any other park studied by the Center for City Park Excellence. According to Jim Dowell, president of the Riverside Park Fund, most users of the park walk from within about four blocks.

Obviously, adding residential (or commercial) density around parks is not a short-term project. Nor is it non-controversial. People who live in single-family homes on large lots around large parks have a great

lifestyle (especially if they can prevent outsiders from parking in their neighborhood), and they understandably want to maintain it. However, a case can be made that increasing density – allowing the construction of multi-story apartment buildings on and near the edges of parks – unlocks a great deal of value for the benefit of the whole city. The benefits include more property tax revenue, the likelihood of healthier citizens because of park views and use – and the ability to reduce the presence of stored automobiles in parks.

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