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Parking Management: A Key to Revitalizing Massachusetts Downtowns

By Lisa Jacobson

You think picking up your dry cleaning will be an easy task, a quick stop en route to work. But when you get to the dry cleaner downtown, there are no on-street spaces to be found in front, across the street, or anywhere in sight. You circle around, once, twice, three times hoping a spot will open up. All you have to do is run in and grab your dry cleaning — a 10-minute endeavor at most — but the search for parking is taking longer than the errand itself. Without a spot available, your options are to park too far away, risk a ticket and double-park, or start thinking about finding another dry cleaner.

This is just one example of a common frustration on a typical New England main street. Many destination main streets in Massachusetts — High Street in Medford, Washington Street in Haverhill, Massachusetts Avenue in Lexington, Holland Street in Somerville, Washington Street in Salem, and the list goes on — are often plagued with high demand for front-door parking, while off-street lots and on-street spaces a short walk away remain empty all day.

Parking Management Strategies

Managing downtown parking correctly involves a fundamental principle of economics: finding the balance between supply and demand. Evolving approaches to parking management create this balance by acknowledging that not all spaces are created equal; those located in the most desirable areas will quickly fill up first and stay full, while the spaces on the periphery of a downtown are less desirable and will be underused without better management. Unfortunately, some communities — often influenced more by complaints or politics than basic supply and demand — have overlooked this basic reality and tried to manage parking with one-size-fits-all regulations and lots of enforcement.

Town planners, economic development committees, city councils, and selectmen in Massachusetts are recognizing the problem. Many residents and business owners are advocating for a new approach to investing in downtowns so that all customers, employees, and residents can find parking where they need it — not just in the remote lot.

New strategies being explored in New England include parking pricing, shared parking, streetscape and transit improvements, demand management strategies, and regulations and incentives such as reduced minimum requirements and parking cash-out programs. Strategies are being designed to make parking available and convenient without breaking the bank. The most effective and controversial is the reintroduction of on-street pricing in downtowns that once pulled out their parking meters.

Demand-responsive pricing reflects the economics of desirability: It should cost more to park in the most desirable locations and less where parking is underused today. This approach encourages shorter-term stays on the most popular blocks, while motivating longer-term visitors and employees to park a bit farther away. What's the right price? Only what makes parking reasonably available. Typically a 15 percent vacancy rate, or at least one space per block face, is considered about right.

With smart pricing, gone are the days of arbitrary time limits; pricing drives turnover far more effectively than the risk of an overtime ticket, and it doesn't say to customers: "Your time is up! Stop shopping in our downtown, or we'll sock you with a ticket." This connection to economic development — especially in a down economy — is what motivates business organizations to become the strongest advocates for on-street pricing.

Shared Parking in Middleborough

Parking pricing is only one strategy in a set of tools that helps foster downtown development. Officials in the Town of Middleborough, Massachusetts, were looking to stimulate economic development by attracting developers to build downtown. One strategy adopted by the town was the elimination of residential parking requirements for housing units in mixed-use buildings where the units were located above retail establishments within a quarter mile of overnight public parking lots. These public lots, used mainly for nine-to-five business, sat empty on nights and

weekends. The public lots were ideal places for residents to park at night and for downtown employees to park during the day.

The sharing plan worked because there was almost no overlap between the times when residents and employees needed parking. The town has realized 20 percent more local tax revenues in the district, as new rental income allowed building owners to fill vacant storefronts by reducing retail rents.

Garage Plans Shelved in Medford

When Medford Square's derelict downtown parking garage had to be demolished, a campaign immediately began to find funding for a new garage, despite the fact that the first garage's structure failed because there were not enough funds to maintain it. The City of Medford turned for help from MassDevelopment, the state's finance and development authority, to explore the feasibility of a new garage.

Recognizing the potential for a repeat, the state's architecture and design consultant, Utile Inc., brought in the transportation planning firm of Nelson\Nygaard to investigate how much parking was really needed in the context of the entire downtown.



A combination of traffic calming, signal improvements, and streetscaping can make crossing Medford Square's intersection safer, faster, and more pleasant, as shown in these 'before' and 'after' images. Images courtesy Nelson\Nygaard Consulting Associates.

The study determined that there were plenty of vacant parking spaces, but access to spaces on the periphery was difficult, especially because of a single intersection that splits the square in two. Crossing the roads in the heart of the square safely on foot could take more than two minutes, discouraging anyone from making what would normally be a quick 20-second walk. The

team concluded that a combination of traffic calming and signal improvements would make the intersection safer and easy to cross on foot in just seconds, putting the vacant periphery parking within a five-minute walk of businesses. The improved intersection would also move just as many cars as before while creating large new public plazas in front of the core buildings that could not keep retail tenants. As a result of these findings, the Medford City Council voted against building the new garage.

Parking Pricing in Historic Nantucket

The Town of Nantucket has consistently taken steps to preserve the character of its historic downtown. During the busy summer months, when the population increases from 15,000 to between 50,000 and 60,000, the town encourages people to get out of their cars by providing a seasonal transit system, miles of well-maintained bike paths, and a walkable downtown for day trips and short stays.

The missing piece of the overall plan, however, is an effective parking system that is welcoming and easy to understand. Previous studies indicate a need for a managed parking system in Nantucket to help visitors locate parking more easily, particularly during the weekend shopping and dining hours, and to alleviate downtown congestion caused by drivers circling for spaces.



Demand-responsive pricing and new technology will help to enhance the historic character of Nantucket. Photo courtesy Nelson\Nygaard Consulting Associates.

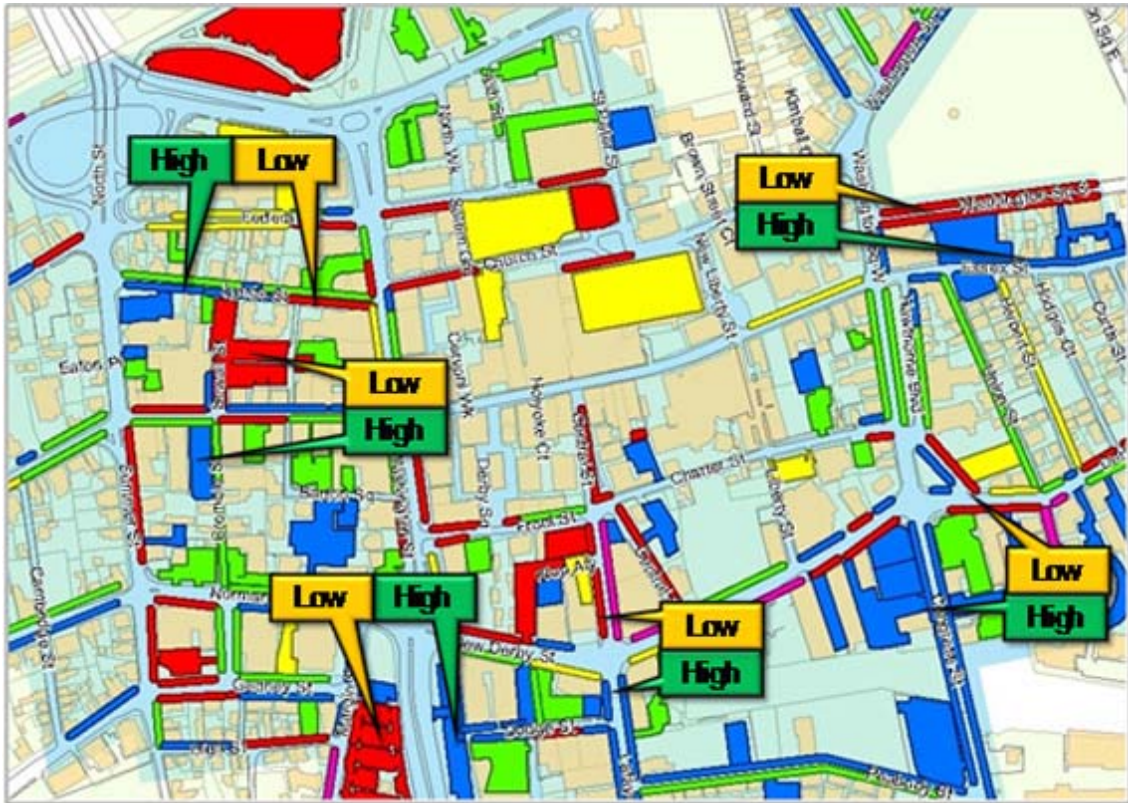
The town is currently exploring a combination of implementation strategies, including performance-based pricing, which would price parking per hour according to demand to maintain availability and encourage turnover. Instead of cluttering sidewalks with multiple parking meters, the town is considering using multi-space kiosks, cell phone payments, and in-vehicle payment transponders for the convenience of residents, customers, and employees. The use of electronic handheld enforcement units and automated license plate recognition devices also makes enforcement more accurate and efficient, allowing parking personnel to act as helpful downtown ambassadors rather than "the bad guys." Ironically, the latest technology is poised to preserve one of the most historic seaside destinations in the country.

Reinventing Parking in Salem

Downtown Salem, a small urban coastal destination north of Boston, is a popular summer tourist destination that also sees a daily stream of commuters parking at its rail station and employees coming to many larger businesses and courthouses. With the city also serving as a regional shopping and entertainment destination, parking pressures are common and complaints frequent. For years, the City of Salem has had a parking department that manages meters and paid garages and provides regular enforcement. As is typical in most cities, however, parking pricing and regulations were designed in response to local complaints, so custom regulations often had to be posted and pricing had to be flat to be "fair."

Yet the complaints did not stop. When a complete study of downtown parking was conducted, it became clear that Salem's system was broken; regulations were too confusing, pricing was not sensitive to the demand, and tickets still piled up. One downtown block had seven different parking regulations, guaranteeing a ticket for confused visitors who thought they parked in a two-hour zone only to find it was a one-hour, loading, or no-parking zone at that particular time.

While the community successfully lobbied the state for a new parking garage at the commuter rail station, a parking study revealed that during the busiest times of day there were still over 1,500 empty spaces available — many within a short walk of popular destinations. Parking spaces along the primary streets were fully occupied, but side streets and the upper levels of garages were empty every day (except Halloween). The problem in Salem was not the amount of parking but its management.



Availability of parking varies widely from block to block in Salem. Many on-street segments or lots with low availability are across the street or next to areas with high availability. Image courtesy Nelson\Nygaard Consulting Associates.

With input from many stakeholders, Salem's parking management system is being redesigned to benefit all users. The redesign creates a simple three-tier pricing system for customers and visitors and a simple three-tier residential and employee permit system. With a vote from city council to manage each curb face to a 15 percent availability goal, Salem is currently in the process of finalizing its implementation plan.

What's Next in Parking Management Technology

With new technology, it is now possible to charge more for the parking spaces with the highest demand, or to change prices to reflect demand throughout the day. New single and multi-space meters can accommodate digital permits for employees and residents, or allow the first 15 minutes to be free. Thanks to better technology, parkers no longer have to carry a stack of quarters; instead, they can just use a debit or credit card and get a receipt. Better yet, "pay by license plate" allows motorists to pre-register their license plates and then just park and go without doing a thing. They receive an invoice at the end of the month detailing how much they owe, or their total is deducted from a pre-registered account.

The good news for municipal budgets — and the reason why cities and towns across the country are embracing parking technology — is that in a few years, parking revenues pay for the system and then some. Cities like Ann Arbor, Michigan; Pasadena, California; and Boulder, Colorado, reinvest surplus parking revenue directly into the "parking benefit districts" where the revenue is collected. These revenues have funded downtown improvements such as better lighting, sidewalks, crosswalks, benches, and trash cans — improvements that help attract customers, businesses, and activity. With downtown improvement budgets dwindling, revenue from parking is an attractive funding source.



Gone are the days of chalking tires; new strategies and technologies are here. Photo courtesy Nelson\Nygaard Consulting Associates.

Massachusetts cities and towns are not quite there yet, but in the next few years, with changes in parking management strategies and investment in technology, downtowns will see economic development — and it'll be much easier for you to run in and pick up your dry cleaning.



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