

**The Politics of Parking – Rob Wipond**

Years ago, I was awaiting the fate of a grant application before Victoria city council to help build a community garden. Instead, council got bogged down debating a developer’s building permit and re-zoning application.

The developer wanted a reduction in the number of parking spaces required in favour of more room to expand his apartment building. Discussion ensued about the number of people moving in, the number of cars they’d own, the limited availability of street and store parking in this high-traffic area, and our tight, expensive rental market.

It seemed mundane. Recently, though, an opinion article prompted me to investigate the politics of parking, and it dramatically shifted my perspective. Most of the article’s arguments and statistics were based on Yale University urban planning expert Donald Shoup’s intriguing book, *The High Cost of Free Parking*. Reading Shoup’s analyses, it suddenly seemed bizarre that, even though I’ve long been aware of the many damaging environmental and economic impacts from cars, I hadn’t thought much about the role of parking.

Evidently, I wasn’t alone. According to Shoup, most municipal governments have never seriously examined the parking issues they’re dealing with daily, and even anti-car tirades like Kenneth R. Schneider’s *Autokind vs. Mankind* and Albert Benjamin Kelley’s *The Pavers and the Paved* don’t mention parking.

Yet this culture-wide blind spot is strange, since cars are idle 95 percent of the time and parking is, Shoup argues, the real root cause of our ever-expanding car use. And while some of his statistical extrapolations can be quibbled with, his basic arguments are straightforward and thought-provoking.

Most North American municipalities have made it a standard requirement for developers to provide off-street parking for new buildings’ prospective occupants or users. This began in the 1930s, explains Shoup, when municipalities were first grappling with street congestion. At the same time, there was a growing assumption most people would own cars and drive nearly everywhere, so not only residential but also retail, business and industry developments were required to provide ample off-street parking spaces.

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This “solution,” Shoup shows, backfired into an explosion of car use. Immediately, the requirements started gobbling up prime urban land. Apartments, stores or event centres often needed several times as much land for parking as for the buildings themselves—not to mention the land required for wider roads to accommodate curbside parking. Making room for car parking, then, reduced urban density and increased sprawl, which in turn increased the “need” for cars.

But an even bigger direct impact has arisen: North Americans park for free on 99 percent of their auto trips. This makes us more likely to drive, and drive solo. In addition, free parking next to most residences and businesses, and along virtually every metre of every block, has made car driving vastly more convenient than any other mode of urban transport.

All together, Shoup calls our municipal parking policies “a fertility drug for cars.” Yet all of that “free” parking space comes at a hefty price.

At the apartment building I live in, instead of having twice as many apartments, the owners have been forced to absorb the costs of providing outdoor car parking on the other half of some of the most valuable, multiple occupancy zoned land in Canada.

In major cities, says Shoup, above-ground or underground parking spaces add \$20,000 to \$80,000 to the purchase price of each unit of a typical building. Such costs are passed onto us all in higher costs for rent, goods and services. How big is the total subsidy to parking hidden within such costs?

Shoup calculates that, in 2002, the subsidy in the US for off-street parking alone was worth between \$127 and \$374 billion. By comparison, that year’s medicare budget was \$231 billion. These astounding costs are in addition to costs associated with the increased road construction, accidents, air pollution, and so on that free parking has in turn promulgated.

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The best solution, according to Shoup, is market-based. Cities should phase out development parking requirements and further discourage car use by increasing curbside parking charges. Then, let the diminishing supply of subsidized parking gradually bring the price of parking and parking spaces up to their real market value, while helping re-shape people’s transportation habits.

This proposal comes with good ideas, like diverting parking fees into neighbourhood improvements and public transportation. But one wonders about long-term neighbourhood effects when, for example, new, central parking spaces start being sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars each—a phenomenon already eroding housing opportunities in poorer areas of New York.

More pro-active government regulating of parking probably has an important role to play, too. In any case, what fascinates me most is that people across the political spectrum have largely ignored this topic, even though the sheer sizes of land and dollar values are obviously enormous. And it’s a head-turning example of a slew of massive “hidden” public subsidies which we, as a culture, should be critically examining—especially during tight economic times.

What about our public subsidy to the forest industry through low stumpage fees, or to pollution-generators through our lack of green taxes?

It’s also intriguing to consider how we could re-shape our cities by using a similar legal economic stimulus to encourage other activities.

Thinking back, I wonder how our city would look today if council had all along been insisting that new residential developments should dedicate equal amounts of space not to free parking, but to free community gardens.

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Car-free Rob Wipond  
daydreams during his  
workday about taking a  
jackhammer to his apartment  
building parking lot.