

NO PARKING ZONE

DOWNTOWN MILWAUKEE'S LOOMING CRISIS

SUSAN SCHEND HEIN

It's a gray, rainy Monday morning, and Jack discovers he is going to be late for his meeting. The alarm clock was not set properly, and his shirt needed ironing at the last minute. Breakfast is grabbed on the way out the door. The Monday morning commute into Milwaukee is worse than normal. He finally pulls off the highway and into his parking lot and finds that all the spots are filled. He continues to his second choice lot. Since he is so late, the best spots in this lot are taken, leaving him to hunt for the remaining spots under the crumbling I-794 freeway that will have the least amount of debris falling on the roof of his car.

If Jack thinks this is a bad way to start the day, he will be in for a surprise when the Marquette Interchange reconstruction begins.

Big parking problems are looming in Milwaukee's future for commuters and visitors, which pose an urgent challenge both for the city's image and its economic health. But it is a challenge for which the city seems unprepared. Obviously, dealing with parking is part of a larger transportation plan, which requires long-term planning by the city. However, there are two relatively short-term problems that the



city seems to be ignoring. The first problem is a lack of convenient parking downtown in high traffic areas, which leads to the perception by area visitors that there is no parking. Secondly, the city is not actively addressing future parking demand as new construction occurs downtown.

The city has been warned about the pending situation, but it seems to

have left both of these responsibilities up to others.

Everyone likes to complain about parking. In fact, a recent survey of residents of Southeastern Wisconsin found that parking downtown is rated as one of the worst things that Milwaukee has to offer.¹ Downtown offers potential visitors much in terms of entertainment, culture, and restaurants; but it seems that once they get to the downtown area, there is nowhere to park. And it is about to get worse.

Demolition of Hwy. 145 has yet to begin, and the reconstruction of the Marquette Interchange is still in the planning phases.

Susan Schend Hein is a Resident Fellow of the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute.

Both projects will result in the loss of hundreds of parking spaces used by both visitors and commuters.

Warnings

In its own Downtown Plan, the city states “ample Downtown parking has been, and will continue to be a pressing concern for the competitive success of Milwaukee. Of greater concern to Downtown’s success will be how parking is accommodated.”² City officials acknowledge that parking is a priority, but their actions need to reflect their plan. Officially, the city has taken a position that there is no shortage of parking spaces in Downtown Milwaukee. Instead, City Hall insists that “parking spaces are inappropriately located and poorly signed. There is a disproportionate allocation of location and demand.”³ So, the city is focusing on “managing the parking situation.” Its plan also includes parking decks that will be used during the day as well as the evening with direct links to local transit (“Park Once” concept), establishing a parking authority, making large-activity generators use shared parking facilities and transit.⁴

City officials are also addressing the parking issue by issuing more parking tickets and making them more expensive. Ticket issuance is up 50% from its 1999 level.⁵ The Department of Public Works took over the main responsibility of issuing parking citations in 2000 from the Police Department. The new ticketing policy is applauded by aldermen who represent residential areas of the city. However, Alderman Paul Henningsen, whose district includes the downtown area, warns that “this overly strict enforcement is shooting ourselves in the foot” by driving visitors away from the city.⁶

City Hall’s lack of urgency is especially puzzling, given the warnings it has gotten from its own consultants. In 1998, HNTB Corporation completed a parking demand study that concluded that overall supply for the downtown area appears adequate at the present time, with exceptions for on-street parking in, and just north of, the central business district. But it warned that “if downtown

development continues to grow as anticipated, the existing parking supply may be inadequate to meet the increase in demand.”⁷

Since the completion of this study, an explosion of condominium and townhouse development has occurred in the downtown area. With this explosion of construction, new residents are coming to the downtown area, and they are bringing their cars. The city is already planning on an increased number of downtown residents from 7,200 a few years ago to 27,200, growing at a rate of 500-800 units per year. A list of all building permits for lots and structures since January 2000, compiled by the Department of City Development, reveals that all permits were issued for alterations of current lots and structures.⁸ In addition, even though the city’s own Downtown Plan recommends approximately thirty-five new parking decks or additions over time, there are no new plans in the pipeline for any new large scale parking projects, either private or public.⁹

The Downtown Boom

In the past decade, a great deal of development has occurred downtown. The Calatrava addition to the Milwaukee Art Museum, the continuing expansion of the Riverwalk, the Midwest Express Center, booming growth in the Third Ward, and even Brady Street — all help bring more and more visitors to the downtown area. Many will bring their cars. Future development will also increase the need for adequate parking and ease in locating it. A Harley Davidson museum is planned for the northern area of downtown. A future public market to be located on the corner of N. Broadway and E. St. Paul will create another draw to the city; however, its location will also remove some existing parking.

It seems unlikely that mass transit will work for all new developments. Using a shuttle bus to get to Summerfest is one thing; hauling packages and purchases on buses or light rail is quite another. Undoubtedly, the new development will be good for Milwaukee, drawing more visitors to the city. But there is a simple Catch-22: Parking will be lost to make

room for development, which will draw more people into the downtown area, which will require more parking spaces.

Future developments and their parking issues are minor compared to the highway maintenance looming in the near future. Developers are eager for an opportunity to invest in the land that will be opened up by the Hwy. 145 removal. Currently, much of the land underneath the freeway is parking. While it is rarely esthetically pleasing, it serves a function. Many businesses and institutions, including MATC and MSOE, will be affected by the spur removal. Surveying the vast sea of cars under the spur, one can only guess what the owners of these cars will do in the future.

One obvious consequence will be higher parking costs. On average, daily rates for surface lot parking are usually less than parking in structures, so those that move to a parking structure will see an increase in their expenses for parking. Moreover, the increase in the demand for parking in structures will raise the prices so those currently using the surface lots will see an even bigger jump in parking prices. For some commuters this may not be a problem; but for others, such as students and employees in service sector jobs, this increase may hurt.

More serious, however, may be the effect on local businesses. Many patrons visiting the restaurants and entertainment venues on the north side of downtown will often park in the area underneath or near Hwy. 145. Bob Leszczynski, co-owner of three Water Street restaurants and pubs, worries that potential patrons may stay in the suburbs if it gets harder for them to find parking. He believes that advertising the location of structures would help some customers that are not familiar with the area. He also said parking is much harder

to find for his employees at his restaurant south of Wells Street than his other two establishments further north.¹⁰ He explained, "Many of my employees have nowhere to park. They either leave their cars by O'Danny's and walk, or they try using the parking structures. But many times the structures are full so they have to play the meter game." Customers and employees are now competing for the same spots. This is usually not a problem over the lunch hour, since 90% walk from their offices — although dinner is another problem. "Customers complain about parking all the time. Sometimes they drive around for 30 minutes before finding a spot."

Commuters will also feel the pinch. According to a survey of commuters working for companies with more than 100 employees, roughly 16% carpool with two or more persons, almost 15% use public transit, and almost 64% drive alone or are dropped off, with the remaining commuters walking, biking, or telecommuting to work.¹¹ Another survey of downtown parkers asked how far people parked from their destination.¹²

Seventy-one percent of respondents park their cars two or less blocks from their destination, 24% are two to four blocks, and a remaining five percent are more than five blocks from their destination. Therefore, most commuters drive alone and park less than two blocks from work.

This will be a difficult habit to change as the pending highway construction projects begin.

The Marquette Interchange

Beginning in 2004 and continuing through 2007, the billion-dollar renovation of the Marquette Interchange will snarl traffic into and out of Downtown Milwaukee.

*Surveying the vast sea
of cars under the spur,
one can only guess what
the owners of these cars
will do in the future.*

This project will also eliminate hundreds of parking spaces under the freeways on which commuters and visitors now rely. The best-case scenario for daily commuters would be a little inconvenience; the worst-case scenario is a traffic-parking snafu that will drive workers and businesses out of downtown because they can no longer do business here. The city cannot take a chance with the worst-case scenario; it cannot afford to lose more businesses to the suburbs or other cities.

As it is, any business or organization that does not provide parking for 100% of its employees or customers and is near the Marquette Interchange and I-794 will be affected: that includes Marquette University, Milwaukee Insurance, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, Wisconsin Electric, Firststar, United States Postal Office, and Amtrak. Marquette University is leasing Lot M from the County, and they are preparing to lose that lot with its 683 spots beginning in the fall of 2004. This lot is their only commuter lot, and they are in discussion with the Department of Transportation and the County for alternatives.¹³ These commuting students generate revenue for Marquette so the University has a strong desire to accommodate them. How many other businesses have as pressing a need that they would take the same pro-active approach? Except for Amtrak, most other businesses just need to worry about employees — not customers.

Despite the potential fallout, transportation planners seem loath to acknowledge the project's impact on parking. During the November 15, 2001, public hearing on the Marquette Interchange project, for instance, design alternatives were showing greenspace underneath the reconstructed freeways. Greenspace would look wonderful, but is it practical? One consultant who was there to answer questions admitted that it would probably have to be used for parking, and this would be addressed in the traffic mitigation study in the upcoming year.

Where's City Hall?

Even though the problem is imminent, the Norquist administration appears either unpre-

pared or unwilling to address the issue. Three years ago, the city's own consultant recommended that "a pro-active downtown-parking plan should be developed to address the loss of parking associated with the reconstruction of the Marquette Interchange."¹⁴ But City Hall has been anything from pro-active.

Instead, the mayor won headlines with his dead-on-arrival proposal for the construction of a northern by-pass that would cut across suburban Mequon. City officials departed on a junket to France only to discover that the electric buses will not work on streets that may get snow. Then in September the mayor accused Assembly Republicans of "exploiting racial and city-suburb divisions" by setting up road-blocks to a Milwaukee County light rail system.¹⁵ The mayor has also questioned whether there would be money for the reconstruction project. With the recession and budget deficits, this is a valid question; but Norquist and his allies seem intent on using any budget crunch to push for mass transit alternatives.

Commuter parking does not appear to be on the mayor's radarscope.

What Is To Be Done?

Fortunately, the picture is not all gloom and doom. The Westtown Business Improvement District (BID) #5 and the Downtown Business Improvement District #21 realize that parking is an issue that contributes to the overall health of Milwaukee. They also know that many of the city's visitors do not know where to find parking or how much it costs. The ParkMilwaukee.com website, sponsored by the Westtown BID, identifies parking facilities near a particular location in the Westtown region. In conjunction with the website, the city spent \$4,500 on blue identification signs for parking structures around the downtown area.¹⁶ These new signs are fairly prominent.

The Downtown BID is also spearheading the Downtown Transportation Alliance, which has recently been formed to address the transportation issues that businesses are facing in downtown Milwaukee. Elizabeth Nicols,

Executive Director of the Milwaukee Downtown BID #21, hopes this alliance can also form a parking sub-group to address parking demands.¹⁷ There is city representation in the transportation alliance, but, again, the leadership is not coming from the city.

As time runs out, the lack of an active role by the Norquist administration becomes more problematic. Instead of trips to France, racial accusations regarding light-rail, new by-pass ideas, or increases in parking ticket rates, the administration needs to lead the charge in a constructive manner. At the very least, a partnership should be created with the BIDs and the city to work with the Marquette Interchange project team to jointly solve the Marquette Interchange parking problem. City officials should not just sit as members on a transportation alliance committee, and they should not just wait for consultants to recommend a solution. They need to get their hands dirty and work with the public and Milwaukee businesses.

If the city does not care if commuters have a problem parking when they get to Milwaukee, they should not expect them to return for their entertainment and recreation. The business community seems to understand the issue and is taking a leading role in the problem solving; but if city officials are not actively involved, how smoothly will this go? With all the wonderful new and traditional venues downtown has to offer, it is a shame that the parking issue is perceived as the worst detraction for Milwaukee. Meanwhile, city government seems to be playing a shadow role instead of a leading role in acknowledging the problem, solving it, and also working toward changing the public's perception.

*City officials . . . need to
get their hands dirty
and work with the
public and Milwaukee
businesses.*

Notes

1. Moncalco, Inc., "2001 Milwaukee Downtown Survey of Southeastern Wisconsin Households," Milwaukee, 2001.
2. City of Milwaukee, Department of City Development, Public Works, Milwaukee Redevelopment Corporation, Downtown Plan Task Force, Team ANA, *Milwaukee Downtown Plan*, ANA 1999, p. 94.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 94-95.
5. Greg J. Borowski, "City Parking Tickets Rose 58% in 2001," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 10, 2002.
6. Beth Kormanik, "1 Million Parking Tickets Expected," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Aug. 17, 2001: 1B.
7. HNTB Corporation, "Final Report - Parking Demand Management Study for the City of Milwaukee, Department of Public Works", April 1998, p. 29.
8. Suzanne Hansen, City of Milwaukee - Department of City Development, *Parking Lots/Structures for Permits Issued Since Jan 2000 by Aldermanic District*.
9. Milwaukee Downtown Plan, p. 97.
10. Interview with Bob Leszczynski, co-owner of Stout Bros. Public House, O'Danny's, Oak Barrel, November 21, 2001.
11. HNTB Corp., Appendix F: Employee Commute Options Program, p. 5.
12. HNTB Corp. "Final Report - Milwaukee County HOV Incentive Parking Study for Milwaukee County," August 1996, Appendix C, p. 4.
13. Marquette University Committee on Administrators, August 13, 2001, <http://www.marquette.edu/coa/august2001.html>
14. HNTB Corp., "Final Report - Parking Management Demand Study," p. 29.
15. Larry Sandler, "Norquist Cites Race in Light Rail Opposition," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, September 6, 2001: 3B.
16. Felicia Thomas-Lynn, "New Signs, Web Site to End Parking Hassles, City Hopes," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, December 5, 2001: 6B.
17. Interview with Elizabeth Nicols, Executive Director of Milwaukee Downtown Business Improvement District #21, November 20, 2001.