

How should Idaho cities value parking lots? speaker asks

By: [Alx Stevens](#) January 12, 2021 0



Parking lots near Idaho Power. Photo by Teya Vitu.

How should growing Idaho cities be planning for parking?

Community Planning Association for Southwest Idaho hosted "Valuing Parking and the Land on Which it Stands," in early December, given by Norman Garrick, a University of Connecticut professor who teaches courses around urban planning.

Essentially, Garrick said, many cities across the country — from small towns and metros like Boise to large cities — are requiring far too much parking, and, worse yet, are providing incentives for parking lots over sites for, particularly, commercial development.

As cities across Idaho continue to grow, and are planning for more development, Garrick advises planners and other stakeholders ask the following questions:

Does this town have enough parking? And, enough for what?

Garrick has participated in and led academic studies around how parking has been planned and mandated for decades; during his talk, he showed how case studies in various cities and states across the country from the 1950s to the early 2000s helped him generate his "Six Essential Rules for Effective Parking Management":

1. Base decisions on actual data — Garrick said he was shocked at how little amount of information people were using on which to base parking decisions.
2. Eliminate minimum parking requirements — which the country is seeing happening now, but needs to happen on a larger scale, and it can't be the only measure applied to reduce parking strife.
3. Optimize the use of available parking — such as by offering shared parking (and create a more desirable area for walking).
4. Recognize that free parking is not a thing — "somebody is paying for it," and, in an example Garrick gave, that was the taxpayers.
5. Eliminate/reduce subsidies for driving — such as free parking.
6. Subsidize more sustainable forms of travel.

Through this research, Garrick said he and his teams found that “as you increase parking, you get less people,” and the demand for more parking is created by building bigger, more roads (including highways), and more parking induces more driving.

“When we think about what is enough parking, please keep that in mind,” Garrick said. “As we build around parking, we’re changing the very nature of how people travel in our cities.”

Hartford, Connecticut: A case study

Hartford is now one of the poorest cities in the country, Garrick explained, though, compared with other cities, it did not start out on that track.

Garrick said Hartford used urban renewal to tear down buildings for parking instead of filling buildings and other space in downtown. Despite population declines, the number of parking spaces has continually grown since the 1950s, and only in recent years has the city started considering changing its parking policies.

The city and state currently offer free parking for employees, Garrick said, while at least one company (Travelers) offers a travel allowance, which helps encourage public transportation use.

Also in Hartford, the city posed a much lower taxation rate on parking lots than other land; in contrast, Cambridge, Massachusetts taxed a much higher rate on parking garages than commercial buildings. Cambridge is now one of the richest cities in the country, Garrick said.

“We found if Hartford was able to put back some of (or much of) of this (parking lot) land into productive use, they would be able to gain up to \$20 million more in taxation from downtown property (out of a total tax roll of \$70 million),” Garrick said.

Today, Hartford is also considering a new ordinance — in addition to eliminating parking space minimums — taxing parking spaces throughout the city with a new fee. That is estimated to raise \$2 million annually at the current rate. Garrick noted that number is not close to the \$20 million he mentioned earlier, though he thinks it’s a really important step forward.

Presentation participants had a few questions about this:

Is that for all types?

Yes, with the possible exemption for, mostly, residential uses.

How have the business responded?

While he said he is not following the issue closely, Garrick said there doesn’t seem to be opposition from businesses, and he thinks all nine council members have expressed support.

Does this apply to street parking?

Garrick believes it does not; he also thinks cities like Hartford should continue charging for parking even after 6 p.m.

Is the rate for the whole city, or just downtown?

Garrick understands it to be for the whole city, though the rate may vary in different parts of the city, such as by being higher in downtown.

Is there an approach you recommend for helping businesses see adding a lot of parking will not have the effect they're expecting?

"I think the way you do that is if you get the data," Garrick said with a chuckle. "And there's more data coming out of academia."

Garrick also noticed — from the research done that got media attention, which then received email messages — there was finger-pointing on multiple sides, not just at the businesses.

"I say we can look at how these cities evolved and try to understand how that evolution is related to a difference in policies, so we can learn from those policies," Garrick said. "It's promising, these changes that are happening."

How will ride services, COVID-19 affect the future?

The question of whether ride services like Uber and Lyft will allow a reduction in parking came up, and Garrick responded that he believes that is an open question, because "we don't know what the future of these services are."

Because of that, some cities are unsure of how to allocate space on sidewalks and curbs: should space be prioritized for ride services? Bicyclists? Buses? Parking? Regarding this issue, Garrick said one of the places doing the best work in trying to understand it is Seattle.

Autonomous vehicles also came up, and here Garrick said until that use is clarified (i.e. will they be personal vehicles?) he can't say how they may affect the future of parking. One vehicle that may have an impact, Garrick said, is a small vehicle that is essentially a small and shareable self-driving shuttle, such as those found in Zurich. They are designed to maneuver around pedestrians, among other intentions. COVID-19 may also affect the future of parking, Garrick said, as some establishments, like restaurants, are using parking spaces, such as for outdoor dining.

This "Valuing Parking and the Land on Which it Stands," presentation, available on COMPASS's [website](#) and [YouTube](#), is part of COMPASS's "Education Series." The next one, titled "[High-Capacity Transit in the Treasure Valley ... What Would It Take?](#)" is scheduled for Jan. 26. COMPASS welcomes community feedback, including what residents and stakeholders would like to see in topic presentations and information dissemination.

Some closing questions (and answers)

Is van pool and car pool more popular with limited parking?

Yes, and having public transportation is helpful.

With one of the impacts of the pandemic being a reduction in public transportation or ride sharing utilization, could there be a surge in personal automobile use?

Garrick believes right now that's happening, though all types of travel are down. Automobile use is close to its pre-pandemic numbers. And, in other cities across the globe (like Tokyo), after comparable epidemics, "we see public transport went back to somewhat normal."

Based on your research, how long does it take for a city to see a difference after implementing new policies?

Garrick recalled a change in Philadelphia taking place over just a couple of years, however he also thinks that probably depends on how other things are going in terms of the economy.

In cities that have eliminated parking minimums, have there been pad developments, particularly on large retail parking lots?

Garrick said he does not know the answer to that yet, and he thinks it's too early to tell. Garrick has heard, though, that the changes have made that possibility easier, and some parking lots in Hartford are planned for residential development in downtown.

Can you address how large tracts of land dedicated to parking affect house affordability?

When developers are forced to build parking spaces, ordinances are enforcing an additional cost on developers. Garrick recalled a colleague — working as an architect in San Francisco, now dedicating his time to affordable housing — giving an example of the above answer: because of the need for parking, parking had to be created underground, the number of spaces had to be cut down, and an expensive elevator had to be installed. That cost affects affordable housing, he said.