Urban Parking Audits in Planning

The long school vacation is on and still there has been no let-up on the traffic congestion within the urban centres. And parking is a big part of that problem. Parking is a key element in influencing travel choices and managing demand. And yet we do not seem to understand how much parking is available, how parking is used, and what are the policies that should govern parking.

We typically keep track of buildings, land uses, and road infrastructure, but do not have a good sense of how much parking exists or how it is used. There is therefore a need for parking audits. Parking audits can fill this knowledge gap and help policymakers understand what steps should be taken to tackle parking-related issues. One of the most important components of an audit is an inventory of existing parking supplies, which should include publicly available parking, at a minimum, but also private parking for a more complete understanding of its role in the transportation-land use system.

For example, it is important to have detailed and up to date information about parking resources for planning and customer education, such as the following:

- On-Street Utilization
- On-Street Time Limit Map
- Supply/Demand by Zone

Minimum parking requirements are the most common tool that many cities use to manage parking supplies. These requirements the assumption that too little parking will keep visitors away or lead to traffic problems. However, while these are sometimes reasonable concerns, many other important considerations should be taken into account when crafting urban parking policies. Key issues to keep in mind are outlined below.

Parking encourages people to drive, and creates traffic, and can hurt a city's progress towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions, managing traffic, and encouraging the use of travel alternatives.

Drivers are willing to spend time cruising to find a free on-street parking space, even when off-street parking is readily available for a fee.

At work and business, parking may be provided for company-owned trucks, vans, etc., employee and visitor, autos, and delivery vehicles. And at school, parking is provided for teachers, and might be considered for students, and parents' pick-up and drop-off.

There are other categories of parking demands, such as (a) derelict vehicles, (b) taxi and maxi-taxi stands, (c) loading and unloading of commercial vehicles, and passenger drop-off / pick-up points along the route. Discarded vehicle shells and other large parts are becoming more and more common along the roadways, particularly in rural and some residential districts. All taxi stands and nearly all maxi-taxi stands are located on roads in the urban areas, thus reducing the already limited road space; the illegal PH cars also ply on-street. The only maxi-taxi stands that are off-street is the Red-band at City Gate and the Yellow-Band just west of City Gate. Commercial vehicles still stop on the busy travelled lane to unload or load their goods. One of the attractive features of taxi and maxi-taxis to the commuter is that they stop at any location along a route for pick-up or drop-off, even if it is within an intersection itself.

Despite the above information being known to all road users, the emphasis in reducing traffic problems by the decision makers continues to be exclusively on how to increase the capacity of the highways. There is not enough appreciation of the significant impacts of parking on traffic.

A review of a number of US studies of journey to work by RW Willson and DC Shoup in 1990 concluded that (i) free parking greatly encourages solo driving; (ii) when subsidies are reduced or removed, a significant number of solo drivers switch to car pools or public transport (provided that there were subsidies on the cost of public transport); (iii) between 19 and 81 percent fewer employees drive alone to work when they have to pay for their own parking, leading to an overall drop in the number of cars driven to work between 15 and 38 percent. Another study done by Willson and Shoup in Ottawa showed that when car parking charges were increased for all employees, there was a reduction of 20 percent in the number of employees solo driving, but there was no increase in carpooling as virtually all the trips transferred to public transport.

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Aug 18, 2016