

Parking lots: Time for a new look?

The convenience of huge parking lots is not worth the price we pay or the damage to the environment.

By Jim vonTungeln

Few things on earth dominate our waking life as much as the common parking space. Each year Americans spend millions of gallons of gas while cruising to find one. At the same time we spew a commensurate amount of pollutants into the air to strangle an already friable planet.

Parking claims first priority in the design of any building or the plan of any city. It rules our life with the heartlessness of a petty dictator. And yet we worship it beyond all reason and demand that it be provided to us at no cost.

Until recently, that is. A combination of forces of late is causing us to reconsider whether so much free parking is really needed. These forces begin with the sheer cost of providing and maintaining so much asphalt. They also include aesthetics, an emphasis on sustainability and the fact that automobiles may lose some stature when gas costs seven or eight dollars a gallon.

In looking at the nature of parking facilities, we already know the one benefit: They provide us a place to store a vehicle while we do something. If we are lucky, a space is close enough that we don't have to walk far to do whatever it is we want to do. This sums up the benefits.

On the other side, parking facilities:

1. Offer us nothing to ennoble the urban fabric except a sea of asphalt;
2. Produce a huge amount of heat that contributes both to our discomfort and to global warming;
3. Discharge a sea of pollutants into our drainage basins;
4. Prevent the natural purification of groundwater;

5. Can cost more than the structure(s) they serve;
6. Consume land previously occupied by useful and, often, beautiful, structures; and
7. Deplete our natural environment.

Considered from this perspective, they begin to lose some of their magic. As I say, some experts are beginning to view the concept of unlimited free parking with a more critical eye. The soon-to-become seminal work in this area is Donald Shoup's book, *The High Cost of Free Parking* (American Planning Association; Planners Press, Chicago, 2005). This work provides much of the background for this column as well as follow-up work in the coming months.

Shoup argues that providing free parking might be compared with providing unlimited free pizza or phone service. Imagine the waste and gluttony that would result. Shoup makes a compelling case that this has occurred with our passion for free parking.

For now, let us consider some issues that should concern municipal officials. The first deals with the vast amount of unused parking lots in most cities. Years of over-regulation have created entire blocks of unused asphalt parking lots. As state and federal agencies require more and more attention to storm-water management, shouldn't we consider alternate uses for some of these areas?

For example, the concept of "rain-gardens" is taking hold in progressive cities. These consist of man-made depression in the ground used to improve water quality. These landscaping tools are placed strategically to intercept water runoff. They filter runoff in the same manner

that the natural landscape does.

In addition, removing unneeded asphalt could help reduce "heat-pods" associated with large asphalted areas. It's hot enough in our state without help from the urban overlay.

Where rain-gardens are not feasible, landscaping requirements work toward the same goals. They are particularly needed in our downtown areas, where most parking lots are simply empty lots where proud buildings once stood. In some cases, the foundation-works still shows through the surfaces of parking lots.

If your current zoning code doesn't require landscaping for parking lots, by all means consider an amendment. The most common requirements include perimeter landscaping plus some ratio of plantings per a given number of spaces. More progressive requirements might include landscaped berms to shield large parking lots from the view of passers-by. While you are at it, include requirements for continued maintenance.

It is just as important that we consider the number of parking spaces currently being required in our zoning codes. We will take up that topic next month with some research findings that may surprise you. In the mean-



As the lot at Little Rock's Alltel headquarters proves, parking lots can be designed and built around the landscape.



This parking lot at the corner of Broadway and Roosevelt Road in Little Rock is far too big for the business it serves. Not only is the space wasted, it makes the city hotter and the unused asphalt pours pollutants into our streams and rivers.

time, take a ride around your city and see if you really need that much parking.



Jim vonTungeln is staff planning consultant available for consultation as a service of the Arkansas Municipal League and is a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners. Persons having comments or questions may reach him at 501-372-3232. His Web site is www.planyourcity.com.



Neighboring parking lots in downtown Little Rock illustrate the impact of modest landscaping—or lack thereof.