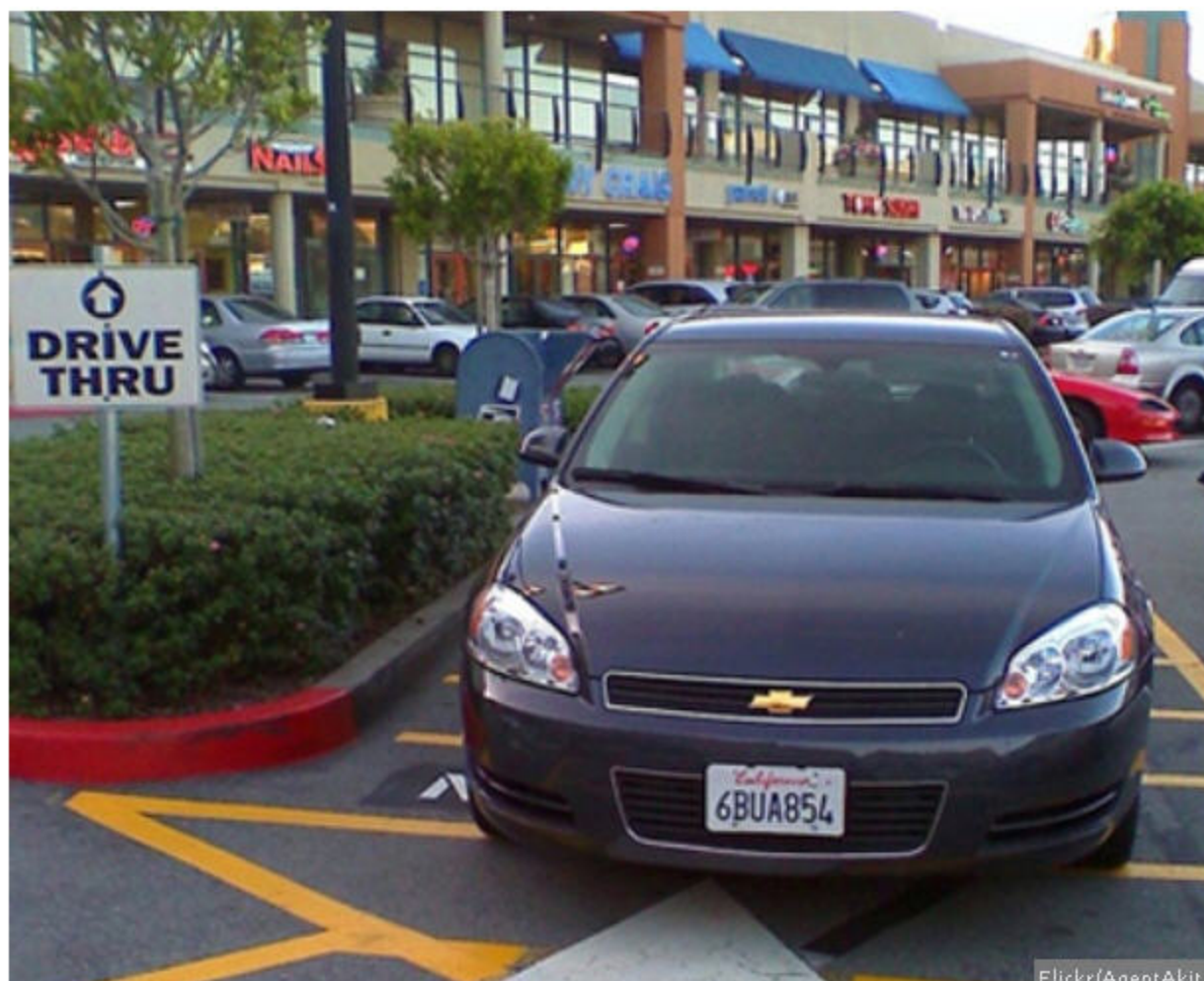


It's the Parking, Stupid: One Transportation Consultant's Tough Love Approach

EMILY BADGER | OCT 20, 2011 | 42 COMMENTS



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Transportation consultant Jeffrey Tumlin figures that you've got to be colorful when you're talking about the intractable problems of urban parking infrastructure. As such, he describes what he does this way: "Our business operates like a methadone clinic to get cities off their parking addictions," he says. "And each addict goes through a different route."

Tumlin, a principle with transportation planning consultancy [Nelson/Nygaard](#) in San Francisco, has worked with cities on the East and West Coast to build more transit-oriented development and fewer parking garage behemoths. And befitting his addiction analogy, he has a lot of painful things to say to people in these places. He thinks handicapped drivers shouldn't necessarily get free parking, and that some beloved residential parking permit programs must go. He believes that poor people are willing to pay more for parking than we think, that more expensive parking can actually make customers happier, and that a row of pricey credit-card-operated parking meters can in fact make for more successful commercial districts.



Tumlin

"Somebody who's screaming about 'parking needs to be free!' I can sit down with them for 20 minutes and get them to understand," he says. "But it takes a full 20 minutes. And in a world where everything has to be distilled into 15-second sound bites, it's really hard to convince people on a large scale."

The Atlantic Cities had 20 minutes to spare this week at the [Rail-Volution](#) conference in Washington, where Tumlin was preaching some of his painful parking innovation. And so we asked for the full story.

Tumlin starts with another great metaphor: What would happen if we gave all children free ice cream? They would, undoubtedly, be thrilled. But in the process we'd also be creating obesity, driving up the price of milk, and probably causing a cheese shortage. "And just as it would be very bad economic and social policy to provide free ice cream for all children," Tumlin says, "it is also bad to provide free parking for all motorists."

In his search for parking policy that truly reflects the market demand and value of a 9-by-20-foot strip of asphalt, Tumlin sounds a lot like an economist. In fact, he thinks we'd be better off thinking of transportation as a branch of economics rather than engineering. For years, cities have told people that they have to pay for parking meters to create more money for general funds, as if those quarters were a kind of tax. That logic obscures the fact that people should pay for parking because parking in and of itself has a cost – and because by charging for parking, cities create parking availability, which is the real commodity.

"What customers want is not a certain number of parking spaces, but really just one empty parking spot where they want to go," Tumlin says. "That's all they need."

The advent of pay-by-credit card technology allows cities to raise the price of parking to where enough people are turned away onto alternate forms of transportation, without upsetting the people who are now paying more. That's the trick of credit cards (and a lesson plenty of other businesses have long understood): People don't mind paying more for something when they don't actually have to hand over that difference in cash (or coins).

"What had been a horrible city council hearing that would go on until 3 a.m. about raising the price of city parking \$1.25 to \$1.50 an hour, no one notices any more," Tumlin says, "because it's doesn't make a difference."

And because people tend to highly value their time, they're generally happier to pay more for a parking spot right in front of a store than to pay less for a spot that requires 10 minutes of circling. This makes customers happier, and it also facilitates a larger number of people – some of whom now come on bike or transit – getting in and out of a popular shopping district.

When cities raise parking prices in partnership with local businesses, they can explain that such policies exist to create more successful commercial districts. And the city as a whole, Tumlin says, is going to make a lot more money off having successful commercial districts than it ever will off of its parking meters.

Technology, meanwhile, can take advantage of changes in supply and demand by the hour, or the season, or even according to swells in the national economy, adjusting parking rates according to real-time availability. San Francisco is [rolling out such a strategy](#) this month.

All of this technology is making it easier to address parking pricing. But the technology has also been around for a few years, even as old assumptions about parking have continued to persist. "Technology," Tumlin says, "has made it even more embarrassing for the cities that are badly managing their parking."

As these systems move parking toward a more market-responsive approach, Tumlin also has his eye on distortions such as the free parking given at disabled spaces. "Disabled people," he says, "don't need to have their parking subsidized unless they are low-income *and* disabled." It makes no sense, he adds, to give free parking to a disabled doctor or lawyer. But we're not very good, Tumlin says, at having grown-up conversations about how to accommodate people with disabilities. Washington, D.C., will test this idea later this year with an everyone-pays policy (which will require, among other things, some newly designed parking meters).

Tumlin commonly hears one other objection to his ideas: Where will the poor people park? The poorest people, he's found, aren't looking for parking because they don't own cars. But among the rest of this demographic, he says surveys show that poor people also place an extremely high value on their time. They too often say they're willing to pay a little more for parking if it means they don't have to waste time looking for it.

"It's very interesting to do the detailed demographic surveys and ask people what they want," he says. "And what we find again and again is that the people who are complaining about 'oh my goodness, where will the poor people park?' are not the poor people."

But cities have to be careful, he adds, that as they raise parking prices – and some residents will inevitably be harmed by this – they're conscious of investing the revenue in ways that will help mitigate that harm, in, for instance, better bike, transit or walking infrastructure.

"You can create an enormous net public equity benefit by charging for parking," he says. "The real argument is that there is nothing more inequitable than our current policies of providing gross subsidies to the wealthiest and most privileged members of society, who are the people who own the most cars."

Tumlin's addiction metaphor implies that after cities go through this painful period, they'll come out the other end into some kind of recovery. So what exactly will that look like?

"Ahh, the utopian market paradise," he says, laughing. In that world, he predicts, cities will generate greater economic activity by diverting the money that's spent on building parking garages into something else. Individual property owners will earn more money by charging for something they're now giving away for free. It will also become easier to drive for the people who still do as the roads are cleared of parking hunters, and as more people move onto other forms of transportation (some of which will hopefully be funded by parking revenue).

"This is why the market is just so brilliant," Tumlin says. "You can make it easier to drive, make people happier about the driving experience, and still have fewer people drive."

Photo courtesy of Flickr user [AgentAkit](#).

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