



Parking Authority of the Borough of Metuchen

Downtown Parking Study

Stakeholder Outreach Summary



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APPROACH

This report summarizes input received from Metuchen stakeholders during the public outreach phase of the Downtown Parking Study. This outreach was completed via three primary outreach activities.

ONLINE SURVEY

The Parking Study's online survey was launched in mid-October and was maintained through mid-December. Of the many advantages of an online survey, one of the most critical is that it can remain a source of outreach and input throughout the course of a study — maximizing participation opportunities to accommodate those with tight schedules or other obstacles to attending scheduled meetings. During the course of the outreach phase, and beyond, those expressing a desire to contribute thoughts, concerns, recommendations, etc. were encouraged to complete this survey, which provided many opportunities for open-ended input.

FOCUS GROUPS

Throughout the study, small-group discussions were held with stakeholders representing unique relationships to downtown parking. The Focus Group format provides these specific stakeholder groups with an opportunity to collectively outline and discuss issues of specific interest to them. Discussions were held with representatives of the following stakeholder populations.

- Business and Property Owners
- Residents
- Planners and Policy Makers
- Transportation Advocates

DIRECT INTERVIEWS

Interviews were conducted with key policy makers, planners, and parking management personnel. Discussions with individual Downtown merchants, residents, and other stakeholders were also conducted, on an ad hoc basis, during parking-survey fieldwork.

SUMMARY OF INPUT

The following summary of input received during these outreach efforts is organized around input received from the following stakeholder groups.

- Business and Property Owners
- Downtown Employees
- Visitors
- Downtown Residents
- Transportation Advocates
- Policy Makers

BUSINESS AND PROPERTY OWNERS

Business and property owners appear to sense a transition in the relationship between parking and development in Downtown. Many see an opportunity in a shift toward using shared parking to support infill development. Others are unsure if this approach will prove viable. At the same time, traditional concerns about customer access to on-street parking remain paramount to many retail and dining-oriented business owners.

Downtown Commerce

Downtown is slowly replacing the traditional retail activity that has been diminishing for decades with more dining and drinking

establishments and boutique/ specialized retail shops. Yet, most businesses still close around 7PM on weekdays. The busiest days are Thursday to Saturday, including increased evening activity on these days.

Merchant and Employee Parking

A lack of enforcement appears was said to enable the misuse of on-street parking. Most Focus Group attendees noted that merchants and their employees frequently consume a significant share of on-street parking, including several that will park right outside their business. One retail merchant noted that she doesn't count on her customers being able to park in front of her store, as nearby merchants/ employees tend to occupy the whole block, all day. Attendees noted a need for a concerted effort to change behavior. The Chamber of Commerce was suggested as a potential partner in such an effort.

Efforts by the MPA to attract Downtown employees into MPA lots, through discounted monthly permits, were noted to have helped. However, one attendee said that tenants in his building did not know that permits were available to them, indicating an opportunity for better marketing to improve the effectiveness of this pricing strategy.

Survey results indicate that business owners, on average, are able to park much closer to their business than their customers can. No owners indicated typically having to parking two or more blocks from their business, while nearly 25% of visitors reported typically parking at least this far from their primary destination. Part of this is no doubt due to business owners having their own off-street spaces. But is also is likely a reflection of the impact of business owners and employees consuming on-street spaces meant for customers.

On-Street Management

Focus Group attendees stressed that weekday midday period is an important, peak-demand period for Downtown, one that is particularly dependent upon on-street availability. At these times, there is considerable lunch-hour dining demand from employees from surrounding communities. Because their time is constrained, many of these potential patrons are exclusively focused on on-street parking when deciding whether to stop or move on to other options. While acknowledging that well-marketed, convenient off-street options might help retain some of this business, consistent on-street availability along Main Street was suggested as critical to capturing most of this potential business.

Survey responses confirm this priority among business owners. Asked to identify the parking improvement that would be most beneficial to their business, the majority of business owners named “more turnover/ availability of on-street parking. Further, the increasing predominance of eating and drinking establishments means that evenings are likely to become another period of intense demand for on-street parking, increasing the need for more proactive management to keep spaces available to arriving patrons.

Some form of public valet service was suggested as a way of addressing demand during busy evenings and/ or events. New Street was suggested for a location for this service, as was launching a pilot during cold weather, when drivers are particularly keen to park close to their destinations.

The 10-minute buttons that provide free parking for very short stays were widely praised as effective and appreciated by business owners and their customers.

New Street Lot

Several attendees noted that the New Street lot could be better marketed and managed for customer parking. Suggestions offered included:

- Reducing or eliminating "sticker" parking in this lot;
- Signage that marks metered parking as free in evenings and on weekends (current signs give impression of 24/7 metering);
- Wayfinding and signage directing drivers to this lot, and marking it as a customer parking lot;
- Improving lighting and sense of security for evening use; and
- Improving the pedestrian alley to Main Street.

Zoning + Parking Requirements

The Zoning code needs to clarify parking strategies that are desirable and acceptable. Developers get frustrated when they get mixed signals regarding what they are required to build, available alternatives, and which approaches are actually preferred. It was also noted that this confusion puts too much discretionary authority/ responsibility on Board of Adjustments staff to determine acceptable/ preferred alternatives to current requirements.

Currently, a developer interested in building a 20-unit development with no parking is negotiating for approvals. Codifying how such development can be built will help attract similar projects, and ensure that their parking strategy fits within a comprehensive approach for Downtown.

Shared Parking

Most Focus Group attendees expressed strong support for a comprehensive, and effective shared parking strategy that would promote more and better infill development. Some, however, expressed skepticism that such a strategy is likely to be deployed soon. In particular, business owners are interested in strategies that will make existing off-street spaces more viable and attractive to their customers.

Key Survey Comments

- "Business owners and their employees often take the best parking for themselves, including parking right in front of their business and feeding the meter."

EMPLOYEES

Most employees drive to work. Many are provided free parking, or receive help in purchasing monthly permits. On average, they report few issues in finding suitable parking when they need it.

Commute Support

Survey findings indicate that employees are commonly provided with free on-site parking at work, or help in purchasing a permit to park in an MPA lot. Such assistance is typically offered to help reduce the cost of a Downtown commute and/or reduce employees' incentive to park on-street. The provision of benefits to help offset the cost of transit commuting, which also keeps employees from parking on-street, is less common.

On-Street Parking

Like the business owners, employees report parking fairly close to their jobs, much closer than visitors report parking to their destinations. This may, in part, be due to a common tendency to park on-street.

Cycling Commutes

Among employees who report that cycling is their primary mode of commuting, most do so because they enjoy it, while other prioritize saving money or a more sustainable mode of travel. Asked to name the types of improvements that would most improve their commutes, cyclists focused on bike lanes and safe road conditions en route to their jobs.

Permits

There appears to be suboptimal awareness of the availability of discounted MPA permits for Downtown employees. The online survey also revealed a desire for easier ways to purchase these permits, including an online option.

Key Survey Comments

- "Trying to get to Main street off of Woodbridge in the morning is insane with so many people trying to get into the NY bound parking lot."

VISITORS

Most visitors drive. Most find parking fairly quickly and in sufficiently convenient locations. There is, however, an opportunity to address the concerns of drivers who limit their visits due to parking conditions.

Driving/ Parking

Over 80% of survey respondents who identified as Downtown visitors drove the last time they travelled there. Over half of these drivers reported parking on street. Only about 10% stayed for more than two hours. And nearly 80% were able to park within one block of their destination. However, nearly 20% reported that they considered where they parked to be "too far" to have to walk to their destination, indicating that, for some at least, two blocks is too far to walk.

About 80% of driving visitors report that location or ease of finding a space has the greatest influence on where they choose to park. Only about 7% reported that they choose parking primarily based on price. Most drivers are satisfied with the convenience of Downtown parking conditions, or with the compensations that Downtown offers for any parking inconvenience. About 11%,

however, report that the inconvenience of parking limits their frequency of Downtown trips.

Key Survey Comments

- "I often don't stop at a particular restaurant or shop because there is NO convenient parking."
- "If you need to run a quick errand, it's often hard to find a spot near that one business. If you are planning on spending more time, it's not a problem."
- "I can always find parking downtown, even if it is not directly on Main St."
- "I think we should extend free parking in lots to weekday evenings after 6:30, instead of just Saturday and Sunday. Westfield does this near the train station to help with parking for businesses."
- "Sometimes I want to just run into Fresco's for a few sandwiches or to the bookstore to grab something but there are no spaces on the streets nearby."
- "Free parking in the Pearl St lot on weekends is a great thing and we take advantage of that often."

RESIDENTS

Most of the issues residents have with parking are related to the other stakeholder connections they have with the commercial areas of Downtown — shopping, dining, connecting to Metuchen Station services, passing through, etc. The most common resident-specific issues they have are related to non-parking, commuter-demand impacts on their streets. While complaints about reduced parking availability on these streets were modest, complaints about traffic, and vehicle speeds in particular, were fairly broad.

On-Street Parking

At Home

About 20% of residents who participated in the online survey reported that they primarily park on the street at home, the vast majority of which are able to park on the block in front of their home. Less than 10% report that finding a space is sometimes and issue. More respondents indicated that non-parking impacts from Metuchen Station traffic are a bigger issue on their streets than parking impacts.

Downtown Core

Several residents expressed a need for more disabled parking spaces near Downtown businesses. Metuchen has a growing population of drivers dependent upon these spaces through reduced mobility. This focus on a need for designated spaces typically indicates frustration with overall on-street availability. Unlike off-street spaces, which must be complemented by space for wheelchair boarding and alighting, there are no design distinctions between standard and ADA-accessible on-street spaces. As such, if curbside-parking availability is consistent, the need for designated disabled spaces — which tend to be less utilized compared to standard spaces, is minimized.

Time limits and the need to carry change were noted as a nuisance by multiple Focus Group attendees. By contrast, the 10-minute, free-parking buttons are very popular. Focus group attendees urged a move away from traditional meters, to pay stations that take credit cards. Lack of enforcement was noted to encourage misuse of on-street spaces.

Off-Street Parking

Focus group attendees noted that surface lots can be daunting places at night. Better lighting and more security were urged to

improve the appeal of these options at these times, and to improve the safety and security of those walking by or through them. Precedents for well-designed, well-branded, secure off-street facilities were noted to be found in many small New Jersey downtowns, including Somerville and Maplewood.

Pedestrian/ Bike Conditions

About 40% of residents who took the online survey indicated that they primarily walk when visiting a Downtown business. Many Focus Group attendees expressed hopes that Main Street and Downtown would be identified as places to prioritize implementation of the new Completes Streets policy. Several points along Main Street were identified as being in need of marked, pedestrian crossings.

Focus Group attendees noted that visibility is important for increasing utilization of bike racks. Too often racks are obscured or placed in out of the way locations, limiting their visibility to potential users, and increasing the risk of theft and vandalism.

Neighborhood Issues

The biggest neighborhood issue related to park-and-ride commuters is traffic, specifically high-speed traffic, between local arterials and parking facilities. It was suggested that four-way stops at several neighborhood intersections would help reduce traffic levels and vehicle speeds.

Key Survey Comments

- "People cut through our one way street (bisett) sometimes at high speed and there are many kids on the block. They are trying to skirt traffic light at am boy & main. There are a good # who come down the wrong way illegally from Main. I believe some know they are illegal but a good # legitimately

can't tell it's one way. A new larger and more vivid sign or signs at main St would help with awareness."

- "I would like to walk more, but errands usually mean having to go outside town for groceries."
- "My primary problem with downtown parking is I occasionally take the train to NYC and it's nearly impossible to find long term parking on a weekday. I don't travel often enough to warrant getting a permit and it would be nice to see more long term meters for leisure travelers. Weekends are super easy."

PLANNERS AND POLICY MAKERS

A common sentiment expressed by this group is the need for parking management to serve the overall Downtown vision. There appears to be consensus that the planned redevelopment of the Pearl Street Lot does this, primarily by attracting more Downtown residents, extending the retail core westward from Main Street, and providing a parking resource for infill development on nearby parcels.

Need for a Parking Management Champion

The results of this study will require a "champion" to keep pushing for implementation and follow through. In the short-term, establishing a more comprehensive information campaign — website, printed map/ brochure, wayfinding/ signage, etc. — will help establish and announce a new approach. This will foster the longer term need of rebranding the MPA as focused on managing parking in service to local businesses, the Downtown economy, and the long-term vision for the Downtown community.

Need for Strategic Partner

A partner in this effort would greatly expand its effectiveness, especially in reaching out to Downtown business/ property owners

and developers. The Chamber of Commerce was identified as a likely candidate for such an effort. Recent MPA efforts to improve a pedestrian alley co-owned by adjacent property owners point to the role a strategic partner could serve in reaching out to the broader business community, and highlight the significant benefits the proposed improvement offered them. Similar opportunities will continue to arise as proposed parking facility and parking management changes are implemented.

Park and Ride Customers

Edison residents have always heavily patronized Metuchen Station. Edison just added more parking, but many Edison commuters prefer Metuchen Station for its Downtown setting and for easier in/ out access at individual facilities. Despite common perceptions to the contrary, a recent Parking Commuter Survey found that 70% of train commuters return to Downtown for shopping or eating, indicating some economic benefit to attracting these commuters.

Park and Ride Lots

The MPA has been leasing parking at its facilities to developers to help spur infill development. This has resulted in significant conversion of office space to apartments along Main Street. The expectation is that this pattern will continue, as improved MPA leasing strategies strengthen the viability of this strategy. It was noted by many that such an approach is the only means of attracting desirable forms of development among the many under-utilized sites along Pearl Street and other parts of Downtown.

The Borough would like the meters at NJ Transit lots to be turned off in the evenings, allowing free parking at these low-demand times. They are currently signed as 24-hour meters, but, in effect, are not enforced during evenings. Making it clear that these spaces are free after 6 PM was proposed in support of the growing number of evening-peak businesses along Main Street.

Managing Park and Ride Parking Impacts

Borough planners have been seeking ways to employ a "stadium parking" pricing structure for its park-and-ride facilities. Surveys have found that many commuters are willing to pay more, even a lot more, for convenient spaces. Many are also willing to park further away for a discount. Providing pricing that caters to these desires would improve customer satisfaction, while also reducing traffic generated by under-pricing high-demand parking options — which are also those in the heart of the Downtown retail core.

However, the willingness of NJ Transit to coordinate on a this type of comprehensive pricing approach would be critical for its success.

Commercial Vitality

Downtown lost its last retail "anchor" 30 Years ago. The opening of the Menlo Park mall in the late 80's led to further declines in Downtown retail activity. The future of the Downtown economy likely rests more with activity-oriented businesses like restaurants, coffee shops, pubs, and other places where people gather and connect.

One Borough Councilmember noted that, though his office is located just across the border in Edison, he tries to patronize downtown Metuchen restaurants at lunch. At these times, however, he frequently cannot find suitable parking, noting that Main Street is always full and that even side streets and short-term spaces in the New Street Lot are often full.

Zoning + Parking Requirements

There used to be a full exemption from parking requirements for projects within 400 feet of an MPA parking facility. Now reductions are granted based on attaining agreement for permits in an MPA facility. The MPA has been adjusting the rates they charge for this. At one point, high rates were discouraging potential

development, but rates that are too low don't provide enough funding to make the strategy sustainable.

Refining this strategy, including codifying it and stabilizing the rate, could help spur development at under-valued parcels, and ensure more Downtown-appropriate development footprints (less/no surface parking, more building/ active space). The Pearl Street project, and the proactive, shared-facility management it will bring to Downtown's largest parking facility, is viewed as a unique opportunity to formalize and codify a refined strategy.

This will help address the concerns of those who see the development of upper-floor residences along Main Street as a threat to parking availability, as well as those concerned that such development might be stifled, or built with wasteful parking, without an effective shared- parking strategy.

Development/ Parking Demand Trends

Generally speaking, Downtown is attracting residential and commercial tenants who are less dependent upon parking compared to historic norms. Several new apartments have been built without parking, and occupied with residents that have no cars. To the extent that this market is growing, developers should be encouraged to build for them, including projects that offer lower housing/ commercial-lease costs, based on the better economics of not providing on-site parking.

Long-standing popular resistance to densification may be eased by successful projects that increase Downtown populations and sidewalk activity, without the expected impact on parking and traffic. There is a general sense of optimism that the Pearl Street project will prove successful in this way. It is also hoped that this project will help extend the Downtown core westward from Main Street, along New Street.

Neighborhood Parking

The Resident Permit Parking program has been in operation for several decades. It was implemented when Metuchen Station became a popular destination for non-resident riders. The Borough has had to expand it to more blocks, as ridership has gone up. The program has generally been well received, and viewed as necessary to hold back the potential demand among rail commuters for free parking on Downtown neighborhood streets.

TRANSPORTATION ADVOCATES

These stakeholders are strong supporters of Downtown businesses, primarily for their walkable access from most Metuchen homes. The lack of a grocery store was noted as a frustration for those seeking to drive elsewhere a little as possible and to walk or bike for most of their shopping trips. Areas most cited as being in need of improvement were better pedestrian crossings along Main Street, and more prominent bike parking locations and in-road facilities and/ or traffic-calming to attract more bike trips.

Parking Benefit District

One primary concern among this group is the condition of Downtown sidewalks. Support was expressed for the idea of setting aside meter revenue to fund their improvement, and for the idea of establishing a Parking Benefit District to set aside revenue for these types of improvement on an ongoing basis.

Parking Enforcement

Focus Group attendees also expressed concern about a lack of meter enforcement, and the limits that that might create for pricing-based strategies. One noted that someone they knew lived Downtown, and parked on the street without paying or getting a ticket for a whole year. Others acknowledged that they have heard that if you arrive after a certain time of the day you can avoid the

parking inspection in the lots near the train and not have to pay all day.

Park and Ride Impacts

The impact of park-and-ride commuters on local traffic conditions was a common concern, particularly as it affects pedestrian mobility and safety along Downtown shopping streets and within Downtown neighborhoods.

Signage and Wayfinding

A resident expressed that, after she had moved to the town a few years prior, she was initially unable to find parking and didn't know that there were lots located behind businesses. She suggested that there be more signs directing drivers to parking, similar to other towns in the area. Another resident said she preferred parking on street where she could quickly run errands or pay a bill and said it would be valuable to make more visitors aware of the 10-minute/ free-parking buttons on all Downtown meters.

Bicycle Access and Parking

Some attendees suggested that replacing car parking on Main Street with bicycle lanes would help slow traffic and improve bike and pedestrian mobility. Others noted that bicycle parking at Metuchen Station is frequently full, and that there are too few bike parking options closer to the shopping and dining core.

Key Survey Comments

- "There is little to no space allocated for bikes on County roads. Timing and traffic at Route 27 and Grove is awful."
- "Metuchen has a serious traffic issue from south Main St. to Middlesex Ave every day during commute hours. Something needs to be done to improve this condition."

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Parking Authority of the Borough of Metuchen

- "I am afraid to cross the streets in Metuchen so I do not shop there anymore."
- "Metuchen must do a better job with wayfinding and signage to guide drivers to available parking. Today signage is limited and at times confusing. The PA should have a map on the Boro website and develop a brochure with info, rates and locations of parking lots and spaces."
- "Having more smart bike rack options downtown would ease access to shops and restaurants."