



Need a parking place? Good luck

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LOS ANGELES — After circling in anguish for 15 minutes, holiday shopper Derek Bracey abandoned his search for free primo parking along this city's trendy Melrose Avenue.

"You always hope it will be better," said Bracey, who ended up parking a half-mile from the shop where he was buying a gift for his brother.

This month, millions of Americans could find themselves in a similar predicament, fruitlessly orbiting packed parking lots in shopping centers, malls and downtowns as the holiday shopping season builds toward a peak.

They are the victims of a growing national parking crunch, the product of ever-increasing numbers of cars and scarcer places to put them in many cities.

In the past four decades, the number of registered vehicles has risen nearly 170% and the ranks of licensed drivers have doubled, Federal Highway Administration figures show.

The infrastructure is struggling to accommodate the crush. Many cities are experiencing downtown rebirths with new condos, hotels and office buildings, but the amount of parking on streets remains largely a fixed asset.

The value of parking in a tony urban neighborhood can be seen dramatically in Boston, where spots can be sold. An anonymous buyer bought a space in a Back Bay alley for a record \$250,000. Prices for downtown spaces are up 14% this year over last year and have almost doubled since 2001, according to Listing Information Network, which tracks Boston real estate trends.

Parking structures aren't always the solution. Although 2.8 million parking spaces were built in structures from 1996 through last year, the number of construction starts fell from a peak of 465 in 2001 to about 405 this year, says Dale Denda, research director for Parking Market Research in McLean, Va.

Part of the reason for the reluctance to build new parking structures is cost. Construction costs alone are up more than 35% in the past six years to an average of about \$13,900 a space. That doesn't include the soaring price of urban land.

"The world has changed," says Donald Shoup, an urban planning professor at the University of California at Los Angeles and author of *The High Cost of Free Parking*, which advocates letting market forces set on-street parking rates as a way of revitalizing cities. "We're realizing that the new parking is wildly expensive and hard to pay for."

Some planners are starting to look to technology for help. Borrowing ideas from Europe, they're coming up with solutions such as robotic garages that whisk cars around on metal pallets, and parking spots reserved by cellphones or found through in-car navigation screens.

'Find alternatives' to parking

Some cities are trying to wean themselves and their residents away from the driving that requires more parking. Instead, they're plotting to lure shoppers, diners and workers onto public transit, bikes or their own feet.

"There are cities all across the country that are actively saying, 'We want to limit the amount of parking we provide,' and, 'We want people to find alternatives,' " says David Fields, senior planner for Nelson/Nygaard Consulting Associates in New York.

Even shopping centers and malls, traditional homes to expanses of free parking big enough to be their own small countries, are trying new ideas to ease parking hassles for their customers. Westfield, a big shopping center operator, has close-in spots for expectant moms at all its 59 properties. The lines are painted pink.

It's also experimenting with call-ahead reserved parking, preferential paid parking in a gated lot and a parking shuttle at various California centers.

General Motors is sponsoring valet services at two malls, Phipps Plaza in Atlanta and Town Center at Boca Raton in Florida. Cadillac drivers get free valet parking at both. At Town Center, so do Saab and Hummer owners.

But even when valet parking is available, some people are reluctant. Hector Rodriguez, 40, a Los Angeles hair salon owner, says he hesitates to hand the keys to his customized Chrysler 300C to an attendant. "I don't want people driving my car."

In car-dependent Los Angeles, the time it takes to find a parking spot on the street has doubled in the past five years, estimates Shanette Madden, 40, a Los Angeles property manager. She pulled her Nissan Versa into a no-parking zone and sent her daughter Malika, 16, off on an errand along Melrose Avenue one Sunday afternoon. She says she had hunted for 15 minutes to find a metered space, then gave up. Parking is not only hard to find, she says, but becoming more expensive. "It's just like gas (prices). What can you do?"

Bracey, 40, pausing as he hoofed back from the shop, says he won't even venture into Santa Monica, the affluent, liberal enclave to the west where the popular outdoor mall is rimmed by often-crowded parking structures.

Santa Monica is one of those communities that knows it has a problem and is trying to find a solution. Last month, it started a website, www.parkingspacenow.smgov.net, that gives the availability of spaces in 14 downtown lots and garages. It's updated every five seconds.

"The city doesn't really like parking," says Lucy Dyke, Santa Monica's transportation planning manager. It "doesn't want to waste money on parking spaces we really don't need." Instead, the Web page is aimed at making better use of spaces, encouraging people to find other means to get downtown when lots are full.

New solutions

The rebirth of downtowns and resulting crunch, combined with new electronic devices, are leading to a "parking technology revolution," says Dennis Burns, vice president of consultants Carl Walker.

Some of the ideas include:

•**Automated parking.** Think of a vending machine in reverse. In automated parking, motorists drive their cars onto a steel plate in a garage and get out of the car. The plate is then whisked away like a pallet in a warehouse, all robotically, to a parking space.

"Your car can never be stolen or dented," says Lee Lazarus, president of A.P.T. Parking Technologies in New York.

Eliminating ramps, walkways — even lowering the ceiling — allows a developer to dramatically reduce the size of the structure. It can pack almost double the number of spaces of a conventional garage, Lazarus says.

While they're popular in Europe, the USA so far has only a few automated garages, including a 312-space garage in Hoboken, N.J., and a 74-space structure in Washington, D.C.

While they free vital space in a building that can be used for people instead of cars, automated parking is expensive, at more than \$20,000 a spot, Lazarus says.

•**Finding parking through in-car navigation.** XM Satellite Radio is one of three companies working to develop a system that would allow the navigation screens in vehicles to be used to hunt down available parking spots. XM is working with one of the nation's largest parking providers, Standard Parking, and a technology company, Quixote Transportation Technologies. The system would use color-keyed icons to show how many spots are available in a garage or lot.

•**Reserving by cellphone.** A company called MobileParking is developing a system in which drivers can call ahead on their cellphones to reserve parking spots. Early next year, MobileParking hopes to create a network of 3,100 parking structures in the 30 biggest U.S. cities where drivers can call or message ahead. In some cases, parking attendants will rope off a special area for MobileParking customers, says President Jason Boseck. In addition to the parking charge, customers will pay a \$1.75 service fee.

•**Paying by cellphone.** Rather than having to run out to feed the meter, motorists who park at one of about 90 spaces along the famed Sunset Strip in West Hollywood, Calif., can arrange to get a call on their cellphone asking them if they want to extend their time on the parking meter.

"You pay for parking and if you want to add time, you can do that with a cellphone," says Chris Chettle, vice president of Digital Payment Technologies, which co-developed the system.

It works because instead of standard parking meters, the spaces are connected to kiosks — one for every nine spaces — that accept payment by credit card or currency.

So far, though, not many parkers have registered to use the cellphone feature, says Oscar Delgado, the city's parking operations manager.

A San Francisco company, Spark Parking, is creating a cellphone payment system for garages. Instead of barriers and ticket machines, a parking structure would be open. Motorists would drive directly to an open space. A sensor in the stall would keep track of how long they parked and bill them, says CEO Cooper Marcus.

The system will help give planners a better picture of how lots and structures are used, helpful in setting parking rates.

Higher rates might actually help consumers, he says, by creating more turnover of spaces.

"If pizza was free, everyone would eat lots of pizza. If parking is free, everyone is going to use lots of parking," Marcus says. Parking consumes enormous amounts of space.

"Every car needs three spaces: one at home; one at work; and one at play," says Steve Shannon, president of ParkingMan, a consultancy in Pitman, N.J. "It's difficult to accommodate all these cars."

The key appears to be striking a balance of need. In Ann Arbor, Mich., University of Michigan students compete with other residents for coveted parking spaces downtown. At its worst, motorists sometimes can take 10 minutes finding a spot, says Susan Pollay, executive director of the city's Downtown Development Authority.

The city is studying the parking issue but hopes that parking is only one solution, along with buses, bikes and walking.

"We have become smarter in realizing that parking is not the silver bullet," Pollay says. Rather, it's just "a tool in the toolbox" to a total transportation solution.