

Parking in the USA – Current Trends and Results

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A noticeable change is taking place today in suburban and urban neighborhoods across the United States. The landscape of these areas is undergoing a transformation that will have a positive impact on the lives of American consumers, and in turn on the businesses and communities in which they live and work. This transformation involves the increasing popularity of mixed-use developments.

Consumers have grown frustrated with the unpleasant, unattractive and inconvenient building trends that many of the nation's major cities have pursued. The appearance of American cities and suburbs has declined drastically over the years. Although the United States has transitioned from the plausible need to separate housing from industry, development habits to date have primarily focused on constructing large, "big box" structures in wide-open spaces (often greenfields), with little or no other complementary activity in the surrounding area. This has fostered a continuing dependence on automobiles for transportation between disconnected zones of housing, office buildings and commercial use, as well as a corresponding decrease in community and economic investment.

People are no longer content spending entire days and weekends adding unnecessary miles to their vehicles, driving to businesses, restaurants, entertainment venues, and so on, that are scattered across broad areas. Developers have taken notice. The response has been a shift in focus to the construction of multi-use high-rises and town centers, creating several opportunities for consumers and business owners to build on complementary uses and activities. In both mixed-use high-rises and town centers, housing, offices and retail are concentrated in one place, making it easier for consumers to get to a variety of destinations.

This is a significant and long-lasting trend that will remain a focus in the development and construction industry. As an example, in the past five years, not a single "enclosed" mall has been built, a former staple of traditional development in the United States. Further, in 2006 alone, there were more than 5,500 mixed-use projects in various stages of development.

Increasing the numbers and scale of mixed-use development across the country has many benefits. However, it does pose certain challenges and opportunities. Drawing large numbers of people to one place with many options for activities raises an important question: Where will everyone park? Even though people are able to walk to any number of destinations within the concentrated area once they are inside, many will still need to drive there and have access to safe, convenient and easy-to-find parking. The loca-



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tion, appearance and integration of a parking facility into the mixed-use developments are critically important to their success.

Parking is the gateway or "front door" to a mixed-use development. It is the first and last impression for visitors. It is an opportunity to create a positive and lasting impression. Parking is not about cars; it is about people, and getting people to where they want and need to go. When people experience safe, convenient and efficient parking, they are more likely to have a positive overall feeling of the destination – and they are more likely to return.

Designing parking into a mixed-use development plan is complicated but vital. The most important objective is to enhance pedestrians' connection to public places. Walking distance is important in the minds of parking patrons, and although the distance from parking to their destination may not ultimately be the determining factor for choosing to visit a place, it will definitely contribute to their level of satisfaction.

The successful implementation of parking into a mixed-use structure can have significant positive results. First, parking density frees space for landscape. If all parking can be concentrated into one area, it will allow for more room to be creative with the visual appearance of the garage, and therefore become a safe and inviting destination. Additional space may be preserved as open green space or a public plaza to serve patrons and create a gathering place for patrons and consumers. This is a growing trend in mixed-use developments that serves to reinforce and build community in a location.

Second, shared parking is a unique and purposeful parking management tool. A shared-use garage may serve different user groups throughout a typical day. For instance, someone who lives

Continued on Page 30

Parking in the USA – Current Trends and Results

from Page 28

in an apartment or condominium within the development will park in the facility when they are home, during evening and non-working hours. When they leave for the day for work or school, they vacate a parking space that can then be filled by someone who works in or visits the development. Shared parking is an innovative way to accommodate twice the number of people (and their cars), with only half the number of spaces. It reduces the site footprint and space count, thereby lowering the overall capital cost of construction. This is useful in many developments today to reduce cost and apply the highest and best use for land.

Whether an entire new mixed-use development is planned or parking is being added to an existing location, the goal is to create a “people place.” That’s defined as an area where visitors have a variety of activities available in one place, from retail and restaurants, to offices and community spaces. It incorporates a “sense of place,” fosters community identity, and leaves a lasting positive impression, encouraging patrons to return. Including attractive open spaces, such as landscaped areas or courtyards, facilitates community within a development, creating an inviting environment. The appeal of this type of destination is increased by density – planned in proximity to other uses, such as transportation centers or entertainment venues, and adds significant value to the project.

To best utilize available space, these destinations can be incorporated into the garage design. Many garages add retail and restaurant space at grade level, and office space to the lower levels. This reduces walking distance and minimizes the presence of the structure. These elements activate the street level, adding life and activ-

ity, and most important, people. These design elements create a much safer and more pleasant streetscape, while enhancing the walking experience.

The economic implications of constructing a properly implemented and area-appropriate mixed-use parking facility can be enormous. For example, parking within a development along with residential spaces can drastically increase the value of the units. In some cases, one parking space can increase the cost of a residence by up to 12.5%, and two spaces by up to 25%.

A parking facility in which transportation elements such as trains or buses is incorporated can also have a significant impact on the local economy. It is proven that commerce develops near transportation systems. Transportation-oriented designs often have a domino effect, causing residents and businesses to come to the area, increasing property value and safety.

This is particularly a positive step when a community is moving toward revitalization. Many American cities and neighborhoods face complicated economic issues; parking can serve as an asset and a driver for economic success and revitalization. Parking provides the essential infrastructure to support commerce and activity, enlivening America’s main streets and downtowns.

There is little doubt that the incorporation of parking into mixed-use developments makes them more convenient and efficient, while drastically increasing their chances for success. Mixed-use plays an extremely important role in the renewal of urban and suburban areas. It enhances the experience and environment of the places we like to go; but most important, mixed-use significantly improves the character, economy and sustainability of our communities.

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