

City of Bloomington Parking Frequently Asked Questions

Several public meetings have been held to discuss the proposed parking plan. At those meetings, the City received input and questions that we address in this FAQ.

Why are we doing this? What problem are we trying to solve? What is our parking philosophy?

There are 1,200 public on-street parking spaces available for public use. That number is stagnant. While the number of cars entering downtown is rising dramatically, the number of on-street spaces remains the same. The number will slightly decrease as we convert a small number of spaces to bicycle parking.

Our goal is to manage those spaces – in conjunction with public pay lots and parking garages – in a way that maximizes the use of all spaces and gets people in and out of downtown as efficiently as possible. With the influx of hundreds of new downtown residents and hundreds more employees, we want to ensure that there is sufficient turnover in on-street parking for customers of downtown businesses. The inclination will be less and less to find the one spot in front of a specific destination and more toward long-term parking elsewhere, whether it be a garage, a remote lot, a park-and-ride lot or for public transit or shuttle service. It could also result in more people relying on biking or walking when possible.

That will result in a reduction in fossil fuels being burned by parking hunters, higher on-street parking spot turnover, and more efficient use of all parking facilities.

The bottom line is that demand for parking is growing, and parking policies need to evolve to maintain a balance for short-term visitors, downtown merchants and employees and year-round residents as well as between on-street spots and parking garage spaces.

Why are parking pay stations being proposed?

As in the many cities that have installed them, meters are intended to manage problems that stem from the imbalance between high demand for and limited availability of on-street parking. Pay stations are simply a management tool to promote available parking.

Just as we have already started to manage city garages in a specific, measured, and professional manner, we need the tools in place to manage street parking.

Smart meter technology is the most effective way to manage on-street resources. Metering will allow for a more universal, consistent and predictable approach for motorists. The fact they can be altered (in terms of hours, rules and technological options such as remote payment) much more quickly and easily than signage will also provide flexibility empowering us to adapt to changing conditions or simply to information learned from experience.

Parking costs in the city are far below those charged at the university or in most of our peer cities. In fact, of all the Big Ten cities, we're told Bloomington is one of only two without on-street metering. Our low costs are actually exacerbating parking problems by encouraging more and more people to use vehicles to access downtown.

How did the plan originate?

Based primarily on downtown merchant concerns about parking availability, city government contracted with Walker Parking Consultants in 2007 to study the issue. Walker recommended installing pay stations, among other things. The Chamber of Commerce and Downtown Bloomington, Inc. (DBI), independently evaluated the study and also recommended the installation of pay stations (along with other measures discussed, below).

What did the Walker Study tell us?

Walker determined that, in 2007, 24 of the 56 blocks studied were over capacity during peak parking times. The study points out that on-street parking is finite. While you cannot increase it, you can increase the number of cars you accommodate through higher turnover, which is what pay stations do.

Why weren't the study's recommendations implemented at the time they were made?

Much of what was recommended was implemented soon after the study was completed. In particular, we chose to begin with reforming parking garage management. A private firm, REI of Indianapolis, was hired to manage the garages. That venture has been extremely successful. Up until that point, the city was playing catch up when it came to parking management. We caught up and got ahead of the problem. Now we are trying to stay ahead of the larger problem and plan for the future of downtown parking.

The City should have implemented metering either simultaneously with or shortly after garage management was improved. However, we first chose to see how garage parking impacted on-street parking. Then a series of things happened that further delayed metering: garage management seemed to alleviate some of the on-street problem; the economy bottomed out; a few, large downtown residential and commercial developments were either scrapped or delayed; and, more recently, the Courthouse renovation led to sharply reduced parking in the city's center.

Have things changed since 2007? If so, should we still implement the plan?

The need for the plan has only grown. Walker anticipated the parking demand increase we're seeing. We contracted with the firm again this year to assist us in implementing the earlier recommendations. The firm has been successful in the same effort in many other cities.

Since the 2007 Walker study, downtown has added:

- 509 new bedrooms,
- 6,080 square feet of office space
- 44,797 square feet of new retail space

This increase comes on top of the impact of hundreds of bedrooms and retail added prior to the 2007 study, including the Hilton Garden Inn, apartment complexes on Morton Street and Smallwood.

Additionally, there are a number of other significant development projects in the pipeline, including:

- 597 new bedrooms
- The 168 room Hyatt Hotel
- The 155 room Spring Hill Suites
- New hotels near the Convention Center
- An expanded Convention Center
- 2 Old National Bank lots and the Workingman's building, all on Kirkwood, have already had large residential and commercial proposals floated
- The old Post Office site, an entire city block, will be developed (perhaps with parking)
- The old Bloomington Transit facility will be replaced at some point.

And all of that growth comes on the heels of the completion of the B-Line Trail, which attracts its own traffic and parking demand and which should generate investment along its downtown path. Also, the City purchased 12 acres just northwest of City Hall that will be developed privately in upcoming years.

Aren't parking problems being caused because the City Council allowed new development to have less than 1-to-1 parking ratios?

A common misperception is that reduced parking ratios (meaning residential developments can have less than one parking space per resident) were driven by council member philosophy. In fact, the development community largely drove policy.

The cost of building parking or incorporating parking into developments is high. Developers want to maximize leasable occupancy space and do not want to build with a 1-to-1 ratio. Most planning professionals agree that the market doesn't dictate a need for 1-1 ratio.

While it is true some council members advocate for reduced parking in favor of reduced vehicle usage, the fact is that many development projects didn't even require city council review. And, of course, most of the buildings that house office and retail in downtown were constructed without any parking, at all. In part, that's why city-owned lots and garages exist. Those parking operations are funded by meter revenue.

Advocates for the petition that opposes meters say that city government intends to outsource on-street parking and allow a private company to charge higher prices for publicly owned spaces. Why is that being done?

That is an inaccurate assertion. There has been no consideration of privatizing on-street parking. That claim is likely confused with Indiana University's exploration of private management of its parking operations.

Isn't this just a tax increase that's unfair to those who have to pay it?

It is accurate that the costs of many public services are paid via fees, fines, charges, etc – all of which are forms of taxation. Notably, public transportation users are required to pay fares to help offset the costs of public transit systems. Generally speaking, parking fees are a method of offsetting the costs associated with the development, maintenance and promotion of parking. Those fees also put public transportation on more equal footing with parking.

There is a great misconception that on-street parking is “free.” The truth is there is a significant cost associated with public parking when it comes to its maintenance (painting, paving, sweeping, plowing) and enforcement.

As it stands, all city taxpayers are subsidizing the cost of people parking in downtown, many of whom are not local residents. Metering in garages, lots, and on-street, while not covering all the costs associated with parking, will mean that users of the service are paying their way more than is currently the case. Businesses located at the Mall, on the Westside, and elsewhere are paying the entire cost of parking in their rents. But they are also paying to subsidize the cost of parking for downtown businesses by way of their tax dollars. Metering in downtown will reduce the city-wide subsidizing of parking costs by allowing the City to reinvest parking revenue into downtown services.

There have, of course, been fees for parking in downtown for decades. The three pay lots have had hourly rates and now our garages do, as well. Just as there is a cost of maintaining those assets, there is a need to maintain street parking as a public asset.

The customers of businesses outside of downtown do not have to pay for parking. Isn't this plan creating inequality?

People often refer to “free” parking at the Mall or Westside retail stores (and elsewhere), but those costs are paid in rents paid by merchants and passed onto consumers in the cost of goods and services. It is true, however, that a perception problem will exist. It will be important to continue to market parking ease and availability in downtown as we move forward.

Downtown merchants rely on discretionary spending. Won't this drive customers away?

It's likely there are people who will say they will never return to downtown if pay stations are installed. There will certainly be more people claiming that than actually doing it. But it is completely understandable why merchants worry about it, and it would be dishonest to claim it will not happen.

The fact remains, however, that there are parking restrictions, parking fees and parking fines already in existence in downtown. People already tell city offices they will never return to downtown because of parking tickets they've received. Many of those tickets result from inconsistent or confusing rules that are in place at the request of merchants with specific needs that vary from business to business. Parking rules should become more consistent and less confusing as pay stations are implemented.

Some merchants are concerned meters will harm impulse shopping. We can't say for sure that they won't, but there's no real way to measure how much impulse shopping actually occurs. What we do know is that more and more drivers are not parking in downtown based on the impulse to shop. Instead, there are many hundreds more renters and employees parking on-street, which would seem to be an even greater threat to impulse shopping.

Don't you think this plan will hurt downtown businesses?

We absolutely respect the fact that people are concerned about adverse impacts of the plan, all the more so given the uncertain economic times. But we've studied the issue closely and put all considerations in the balance. There is no evidence, other than anecdotal, from anywhere in the nation that pay stations result in business closure.

Meters were removed from downtown Bloomington more than 30 years ago, and there are many instances of cities removing parking in order to revitalize economically distressed downtowns, but nowhere was parking identified as the culprit that caused the initial economic distress.

Cities that have installed meters do so where the destination is popular enough to warrant paid parking. Where demand drops, meters have been removed. City government will not realize revenue if people do not park at metered spaces, so metering only works if parking spaces remain close to full. That's a fiscal reality that was studied prior to moving ahead with the proposal. In nearly every example in the country, concerns are stated that meters will "kill downtown," but that scenario has not played out. Instead, on-street spaces remain as premium parking and meters are used.

Downtown will continue to be a destination. People shop downtown because it offers something outlying areas to the east and west of town do not, not because parking is free. Our greatest concern is that not doing anything could hurt downtown.

What are the unintended consequences of pay stations?

Obviously, we cannot know with certainty we are correct. While suppressing downtown shopping has not been the experience of other cities that have installed pay stations, we will still constantly monitor their impact and adapt as necessary.

A concern we have is how much new traffic will be shifted to parking garages and at exactly what hours. The new Walker study is helping assess likely outcomes, but we are proceeding with discussions on new parking facilities as well as on alternatives such as new Bloomington Transit and shuttle services.

While unintended, it will not be surprising to see increasing pressure on neighborhood parking in the downtown area. Neighborhood zones are already in place for the most part, but additional zone area may be added and increased enforcement will occur until parking patterns are established. Nobody can know precisely what will happen with metering, but we do know that parts of downtown parking are already beyond capacity and that the problem will absolutely continue to grow and spread.

Can the city provide free parking vouchers or cards for certain people?

On the parking issue, we receive this kind of request frequently, and that's the problem. There are many people and groups who merit assistance. There are non-profit organizations, volunteers, jurors, election workers, Farmers Market patrons, government workers, private business employees and customers, special events attendees and students who the City would love to provide discounted or even free parking to from time-to-time or year-round. Individually, this approach might be manageable, but collectively, it is unsustainable in terms of cost and policy.

Can special parking arrangements be made for employees of downtown businesses?

In 2007, at the request of the Chamber of Commerce and DBI, Inc., special pricing for long-term garage permits for employees of downtown businesses was put into place in parking garages. Currently, a monthly 12-hour-per-day, 5-day-per-week permit is available in any of the three parking garages for \$40 per month or \$2 per day.

Some employers have told us they are happy to pay for their employees' parking and view it as evidence of how much they value their staff. Other employers have been quoted saying an employee having to pay for parking is "a slap in the face." We expect to see that dichotomy of opinion continue. We will do our best to keep lower-priced options in place and perhaps to make shuttle service available to the employees who make downtown businesses work.

How will parking revenue be used?

The top priority will be to reinvest meter revenue back into downtown. Specifically, revenue will be used to fund:

- Current services, the cost of which is outstripping our funding ability
- Wayfinding and marketing of downtown parking and amenities
- Downtown police patrols (uniformed, plainclothes, squad car, bicycle, foot patrol)
- Graffiti eradication
- Panhandling enforcement
- Downtown specialists (city staff dedicated to downtown cleanliness and customer assistance 40 hours per week)
- Downtown infrastructure
- Signalization modernization
- Streetscapes
- Basics – surfacing, striping, cleaning and sidewalk repair
- Parks facilities (including 30 landscape plots, benches, tables and historical markers and other amenities that attract people to downtown)
- Parking garage management
- Parking garage repair and rehabilitation
- Parking garage security

- Financing new parking structures
- Financing a Downtown Shuttle Service

There is much opposition to this proposal. Will the plan move forward anyway?

The City never anticipated an outpouring of support for the proposal. Some merchants are supportive but, of those commenting, there are admittedly more opposed than for. This measure is not one we want to do; it's one we feel we need to do.

That having been said, in addition to the public input sessions, which have already occurred in 2007 and this year, the formal proposal must be considered and voted on by the City Council. Public hearings will be held during that process.

How is the public being included in decision making? I feel like the decision has already been made. Is public input being taken seriously?

Taxpayers paid for the Walker study in 2007. As noted previously, recommendations the public paid for were made at that time and were reviewed and supported by business advocacy organizations. We are now moving to the implementation phase of the plan having already implemented most of the other Walker recommendations.

Three public input sessions have already been held and were covered by local media. Additionally, the Chamber of Commerce, DBI, Inc., and Visit Bloomington hosted a two-hour forum on Oct. 15 for the Mayor to specifically address business owners' and other stakeholders' concerns. That presentation was also covered in the media and is archived on CATS.

Also, upcoming City Council meetings will allow more opportunities for public input. Something that's important to know is that all input received after the initial Walker Parking study was taken seriously and most of it acted upon by the City. The Chamber of Commerce, DBI, Inc., and other interested parties made specific suggestions, including:

Suggestion: Adjust mix of reserved and non-reserved parking spaces.

Action Taken: 561 reserved spaces were converted to non-reserved permits.

Suggestion: Develop shared parking opportunities.

Action Taken:

- City Hall parking lot made available after hours.
- Convention Center parking lot is utilized by County employees.
- Hospital and Cook Pharmica share the lot on Patterson Dr.
- Johnson Creamery, CFC Inc. shares a lot with Farmers Market customers.

Suggestion: Implement a program to brand parking districts.

Action Taken: Each City garage was given a distinct brand.

Suggestion: Improve quality of existing parking facilities; explore public-private partnership for operation.

Action Taken:

- Hired REI to take over cleaning and operation of all three garages.
- New lighting in Garage Art; Capital Improvement Plans done for Band, Market.

Suggestion: Allow valet service.

Action Taken: Worked with two vendors considering a valet business; currently have one vendor expecting to open business this year.

Suggestion: Provide reduced cost options for employees.

Action Taken: Created 12 hour per day, 5 day per week permit in all three parking garages for \$40 per month or \$2 per day.

Other suggestions: Build a new garage, provide trolley service, and create a park-and-ride service.

Action Taken: Each of these suggestions carries significant price tags for which there is no funding stream. All three are being considered and could potentially be funded using meter revenue.

Additional considerations

- Indiana University is considering entering into a long-term lease for management of its parking. Even without that arrangement happening, IU costs and fines already far exceed city parking costs and fines creating a perverse incentive to park in downtown.
- Even if IU does not contract out all of its parking operations, it is likely to either lease or better utilize parking spaces in its downtown area parking lots, which are currently free and available after hours. In other words, all of that parking will begin to be fee-based. If that happens, pressure will increase on downtown streets.
- There are also “unofficial” parking spaces that have been or will be lost:
- Chase Bank lot is being developed into hotel.
- Spaces along the B-Line were lost to trail construction.
- A significant number of cars are parked at what used to be the 12 acres owned by IU that are now owned by the City northwest of City Hall.
- Some people have said they feel like parking in the center of town has been more available this year. It’s likely we’ve been lulled into false sense of security in part due to Courthouse renovation. With the Courthouse reopening, there will be many more cars seeking parking around the Square.
- Many large residential Downtown developments were either cancelled or stalled due to the economy, sparing us from hundreds more cars seeking parking. With the economic climate turning around, all those properties are back in play, along with many other properties having development being proposed for the first time.

What will the parking rules and regulations be (i.e. rates, enforcement hours, number of hours/minutes parking will be allowed, type of pay stations, remote payment options)? What are the upcoming decision points concerning the proposal?

Questions about rules and regulations have not been answered. Two things are happening to determine those answers. First, that is why Walker Parking Consultants have once again been retained. Second, as part of the contract with Walker, the consultants are obligated to seek public input about implementation of pay stations. Just as city government sought, received, and acted on input from the public about initial parking management decisions, we are again seeking advice on how best to implement pay stations. That request in no way assumes someone giving input supports metering, but it also doesn't assume opponents to the proposal don't have opinions on the "how" simply because they oppose the "what."

There are three general areas of decision points to be considered.

- Geography (where pay stations are installed and when)
- Rates & Restrictions (how pay stations should be programmed)
- Technology (what kind of pay stations are used and what capabilities they should have)

Conclusion

Bloomington is experiencing growing pains. Our city population has increased by more than 30,000 people since street metering was last used downtown. And the population is forecast to grow by about 1,000 people per year from here on out. Hundreds of residential units have been built downtown and hundreds more will be built in the immediate area in the next couple years.

There's been a significant demographic shift of student housing into downtown. Our plan is to do all we can to balance downtown demographics to include more year-round residents, retirees and young professionals, but even that means more people in and around the area. All those people bring with them additional parking problems, but they also represent a market that generates purchasing power important to local businesses. We're seeking balance.

All of us are somewhat victims of our own success. Parking demand reflects economic growth. Countless communities would love to have our problems. Nonetheless, we face challenges, now.

The pay station proposal is certainly disruptive to some people, a fact we regret. But the disruption that will be caused if no action is taken to manage on-street parking outweighs the upset caused by the proposal. If nothing is done, it is only a matter of time before city government is asked to do something about parking problems as it was in 2007. We managed our way out of that problem and now have the responsibility to anticipate what is coming our way in terms of parking demand.

Please know we are taking all opinions seriously and are doing everything we can to act in what we believe are the best long-term interests of downtown Bloomington.