



Looking to parking to promote economic development

By **Richard A. Rich**
Rich and Associates

After a recession and several years of near-stagnant economic times, many of Florida's city governments are looking for new ways to support local business development and growth. They have explored a variety of options, but there is one potentially powerful strategy that is often overlooked: parking planning.

Through strategic and creative parking planning, city planners can support local businesses by making it more convenient, cheaper and safer for customers and workers to access retail and commercial locations.

Florida's cities are in direct competition with surrounding suburban communities for both retail and commercial business. Suburban businesses, as a rule, can provide free parking and other amenities that make life easier for residents and visitors. This was an important factor in the decline of urban business in the '80s and '90s.

The great equalizer

A strategic parking plan can be the great equalizer, helping cities overcome this disadvantage. By taking a strategic approach to planning, city planners can gain control over park-

ing behavior. They can support local businesses by encouraging drivers to travel to retail areas that need support, or they can make it easier for employees of companies located in the city to get to and from work.

Pricing is an important component of any strategic plan, particularly for cities wishing to support retail business. By developing parking rate schedules establishing different prices in various parts of the city at meters and municipal garages, municipal planners can influence parking behavior.

Cities can also use parking strategies to attract and support local professional businesses. There are a number of considerations whenever a business is trying to choose between an urban and suburban location, including tax issues and the availability of local resources like restaurants and entertainment venues. Convenience is also an important issue. Businesses want employees and visitors to be able to get to and from their locations as easily

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Richard Rich

as possible.

Municipal planners can make the parking experience more convenient by offering companies subsidized parking in municipal parking structures. This is just one small touch that can make the urban experience much more convenient for local businesses.

The secrets of success

As useful as parking planning can be for cities in their efforts to support existing businesses and lure new ones, it can't be done haphazardly. To be successful, it must be strategic. There are three basic steps to any successful strategic parking plan:

■ **Research** — City planners must have a complete understanding of existing parking behavior. A parking study, which typically includes observational techniques and interviews with parkers, local business owners and other stakeholders, is the best way to get these answers. Through such a study, parking planners can compile the information they need to develop an effective parking plan.

■ **Strategic planning** — If the research shows that change is necessary, strategic planning

becomes imperative. Municipal officials must proceed strategically to assure that parking rate structures are not too high or too low, or that any parking subsidies will pay dividends that will offset losses in parking revenues. There is a delicate balance to be achieved. Parking planners have numerous models at their disposal to determine how rates will impact parking behavior. Also, through the planning process, city planners can determine whether it makes sense to set aside specific parking areas exclusively for certain types of parking, such as short-term retail parkers.

■ **Communication** — No matter how well individual cities address the research and strategic planning phases, most mishandle communication. It is essential for officials to explain what their parking plan is comprised of and why. Planners must also clearly explain the various parking options that are available to make sure parkers know where they are expected to park.

There are a number of strategies that can be pursued to get the word out about a parking plan. Signage is essential, particularly for plans designed to manage long- and short-term parking behavior. Effective signage can be a powerful tool for letting drivers know what their parking

options are and direct them to appropriate parking areas. Other strategies, such as direct mail and municipal parking Web sites, can also be used effectively to inform drivers where they should park.

Public relations can also be a very effective strategy. By working with local editors and reporters, municipal planners can use the media to educate the public about the city's parking program, as well as publicly demonstrate to local businesses their commitment to supporting those businesses.

An untapped resource

Parking planning can be a powerful resource. Unfortunately, for most municipal planners, it's goes untapped. Ultimately, an effective parking plan can provide an important competitive edge for cities in their efforts to support local businesses and attract new ones.

Richard A. Rich (rarich@richassoc.com) is director of parking planning services at Rich and Associates in Orlando. Rich and Associates is the oldest firm in North America dedicated solely to parking design and planning.