



Parking Management in Downtown Omaha: Health Impacts



May 2015

Summary

A recent study found that Omaha is only using 53% of its downtown parking – leaving over 18,000 parking spaces empty even at peak times. Despite the overall abundance, circling to find a parking space still occurs, especially in the Old Market, creating a perception that downtown Omaha needs more parking. These parking management challenges create unnecessary health consequences through increased stress, added air pollution, and sedentary behavior. Plans to adjust parking rates and prioritize shared parking would better protect the health of the 20,000+ people who park in downtown Omaha each day while also improving the current parking challenges.

Purpose

The Downtown Omaha Parking Health Impact Assessment (HIA) focused on two decisions being considered for 2015 by the City of Omaha: 1) adjusting parking rates and 2) increasing the use of shared (as opposed to reserved) parking. An HIA brings together scientific evidence, public health expertise, and stakeholder input when making decisions on projects or policies that would not otherwise focus on health. The key principle is to weigh health impacts at the time of decision-making because the effects of built-in environment decisions, such as with parking, can last for decades.

Health Impacts

The environment where people live and work affect their health outcomes by shaping their behavior and determining their exposure to harmful chemicals and circumstances. For parking in downtown Omaha, the major health impacts are caused by stress, physical inactivity, and air pollution.

Stress – Frequent stress keeps the body in a “fight or flight” mode through the release of cortisol and other stress hormones that interfere with digestion, normal blood sugar levels, blood pressure, and the immune system. This overexposure to stress hormones leads to health problems including sleep disruption, cold and flu susceptibility, and chronic diseases like diabetes and obesity.

Physical Inactivity – Physical inactivity and poor nutrition are second only to tobacco in terms of the number of preventable deaths they cause in the U.S. By strengthening muscles including the heart, lowering blood pressure, and better regulating fat and sugar metabolism, physical activity prevents numerous chronic conditions including heart disease, obesity, diabetes, and osteoporosis. Being active also increases blood and oxygen flow to areas of the brain that control concentration, memory, and decision-making while reducing stress through endorphins that relieve pain and improve mood.

Air Pollution – Even small amounts of air pollution cause tissue damage in the lungs that can trigger attacks for people with asthma and COPD. It also causes inflammation in blood vessels that can induce heart attacks and strokes. Even ambient exposures to air pollution have been associated with low birth weight babies and other negative birth outcomes due to interfering with oxygen and nutrient transport across the placenta.

Circling to find parking increases stress for drivers and adds air pollution. It typically results when on-street parking is cheaper than off-street like in the Old Market (where parking on the street is free at peak times while parking in a garage or lot costs \$4-\$8). Overbuilding parking to ensure sufficient supply undermines physical activity by increasing the distance between destinations and thereby encouraging driving over walking. Parking garages and lots also create blank walls and dead spaces that degrade the street-level environment so people are less likely to walk even short distances.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are opportunities for the City of Omaha Parking Division to enhance the parking experience while also improving health outcomes for the over 20,000 people who park in downtown Omaha.

1. Move forward with plans to: 1) free up parking spaces (and thus decrease circling) by increasing the on-street parking rates while decreasing the cost of off-street parking and 2) adopt shared parking strategies that will make more efficient use of parking which will promote a more walkable downtown.
2. Partner with Metro Transit and MAPA to support the development of commuter choice programs that would reduce the need for parking by downtown employers. Examples include parking cash-out programs, incentives for walking or biking, transit pass subsidies, telecommuting/flexible work schedules, and park-and-ride options.
3. Utilize Parking Benefit Districts to expand parking management to areas of Omaha outside of downtown. After covering necessary costs and parking infrastructure, a Parking Benefit District ensures parking revenue is used for improvements within the district instead of going into a citywide general fund. The revenue can then pay for sidewalk repairs, street trees, lighting, and safety enhancements that would increase walking and mitigate air pollution.

Over for references ►

Key References

- Walker Parking Consultants. **Parking Management Plan: Omaha Downtown Improvement District**. November 2011.
- Frank L, Engelke P, Schmid T. **Health and Community Design: The Impact of the Built Environment on Physical Activity**. Washington D.C.: Island Press. 2003. Print.
- Kolozsvari D, Shoup D. **Turning Small Change into Big Changes**. Access. 2003; 23: 2-7.

For more information including longer reports for the Health Impact Assessment, please visit <http://www.douglascountyhealth.com/healthy-community/health-impact-assessments> or contact Andy Wessel, MPH with the Douglas County Health Department at (402) 444-7225 or andy.wessel@douglascounty-ne.gov