

Review of Shoup, Donald C. (2005). *The High Cost of Free Parking*. APA Planners Press, Chicago 733 pp. \$59.95

When Donald Shoup buys or borrows a new book (and he must do this a lot), you can just see him running to the index, look up the word “parking”, and then make note of the relevant sentences, since every time the word “parking” has ever appeared in some other book, it seems, it is cited in this 733 page tome. Parking is a critical linkage between transportation and land use, and deserves more attention than it has historically received. This book, with its concomitant media coverage, has drawn focus to the topic. The ideas contained within are familiar to those who have read many of Shoup’s academic articles on the topic. His critique of the ITE Parking Generation (and Trip Generation) rates is classic, and should be noted by any planner who seeks “appeal to authority” as a justification for their actions or beliefs.

“Appeal to authority” is however a technique Shoup frequently employs, when turning from analysis to advocacy, citing just about every urban critic’s rant against blacktop. According to Shoup, off-street surface parking is a *Great Planning Disaster* in the vein written about by Peter Hall (1982) in the book of the same name. The worldview suggests omnipotent (but obviously not omniscient) planners force minimum parking requirements onto defenseless developers, who have no choice but to comply. It only briefly notes the hassle and transaction costs of paying for parking at a meter (suggesting they are a thing of the past with new technologies). But those transaction costs (fumbling for quarters at meters) are much like the headaches with stopping at a toll booth before the advent of electronic toll collection, headaches which ultimately led to “free” roads paid for with gas and property taxes rather than toll roads paid directly by users.

Clearly the parking requirements imposed by planners are a proximate cause, but are they really the underlying reason we have so much free parking? Alternatively, do we have lots of free parking because we (as a community) want spatial separation between our buildings in low-density suburbs, or do we have spread out buildings because we want space for free parking? One wishes that this question could have been answered somewhere in the text. Unpopular and uneconomic laws and regulations rarely last in democratic governments where legislators stand for elections whose campaigns are funded by developers. There are reasons the United States has “paved over paradise and put up a parking lot”, and the ill-informed planner seems more likely a tool rather than an agent.

His insights about cruising for free or discounted curb parking are also important, and likely do produce congestion in some dense urban areas. The models presented have pedagogical value, though the idea of a planning course using this as a text may be a bit excessive.

The idea of unbundling the charge for parking from the charge for the other uses of land is also seemingly attractive. We bundle things all the time to reduce costs and increase convenience (e.g. we generally buy the lot and the house together rather than conduct separate transactions). We bundle to achieve efficiency by putting the cost of parking into

the cost of everything else we purchase at stores, or the cost of rent for offices. Without bundling in our economy, we risk drowning in a sea of small charges. This book essentially calls for a full employment act for meter readers, and if carried through, would quite possibly end any unemployment problems remaining in the US.

I read with interest his chapter on “Taxing Foreigners Living Abroad” (not only because I wrote an article for *Access* with an identical title about toll roads being used more frequently in places with many non-resident drivers), as a way of changing the political dynamic and property rights associated with the on-street parking lane by allowing neighborhoods (or business improvement districts) to retain the revenue from parking, thereby obtaining local buy-in.

The solutions to the malaise are innovative, and in the end he reduces his many ideas to a three sensible reforms: charge fair-market prices for curb parking, return the revenue to neighborhoods, and remove requirements for off-street parking.

One cannot disagree with many of the proffered solutions as having roles in specific crowded and high-density places, the kind of places most planners prefer. Yet the vast majority of the United States now possesses sufficient free off-street parking to make these solutions irrelevant for decades to come.

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