

Finding Peace with Parking: A Symbolic Change

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"If you don't require your vehicle to do your job, then it is not the responsibility of the City to determine where you should park it."

With the support of the administration and with the taxpayers in mind, symbolic and substantive changes were made to make the City of Philadelphia work smarter, faster and better.

Just a few months ago, I (Eryn) was taking my three-year-old daughter to the ladies room and as we approached two doors, she simply asked, "Mom, which door do I use?" I replied in my best preschool teacher voice, "Well honey, what do those symbols on the door tell you?" She looked up at the doors and without looking back at me for my approval pushed the heavy door and walked in. Of course, because she's the smartest kid in the world, she picked the right symbol—the one with a stick figure wearing a triangle skirt around her legs.

We come across symbols every day in our lives; some are conspicuous, like those on a restroom door, while others are less obvious. In the workplace, these less obvious symbols provide subtle cues indicating who's with the "in"

crowd. The corner office, the newer company car, the boss's invitation to golf: In the public sector, we found one of these symbols to be a parking spot for your personal vehicle.

In 2007, Mayor Michael A. Nutter was elected overwhelmingly by passionately reform-minded citizens. The campaign's tagline of a "New Day and New Way" inspired incoming government innovators and voters alike. As standard-bearers of this message, we embarked on a clear mission to bring about meaningful change both internal to government and external to citizens when Jeff and I entered the Managing Director's Office.

We quickly came across a symbolic practice that had substantive implications in terms of administrative time and effort, forgone revenue and police resources for monitoring. We discovered it when we overheard a call from an upset city official whose parking space had been taken by someone else. We promptly discovered that many city employees had parking and vehicle privileges but that there were no policies to govern the distribution and management of spaces. We approached the Managing Director (then Dr. Camille Barnett) and asked if we could be free to dig into the problem and make recommendations for change. While we knew that we'd probably cause a little bit of trouble and disappoint some of our colleagues, we had this "New Day, New Way" mindset.

Anecdotally, we found that employees were very sensitive about the topic of parking. Taking it away from those who had it would present logistical and commuting challenges for many. However, we also found previous articles alluding to the public distaste for city employee privileges like parking. We quickly realized that this project was going to need a finessed approach.

Our first lesson learned was that just like that symbolic corner office, a parking spot was something of a status symbol; it was linked to the notion that you were close to someone important. We didn't anticipate winning any popularity contests, but we had the support of our boss and a "do-the-right-thing" determination. Our goals were to create a clear policy for the parking of personal vehicles and to reduce the number of vehicles parking on-street, all while restricting the amount of management resources spent on administering and monitoring this process.

As we started brainstorming policy ideas for parking, we developed a basic logic that held up over time: "If you don't require your vehicle to do your job, then it is not the responsibility of the City to determine where you should park it." It became our policy tagline—easy to communicate and easy to remember. We basically asked people to figure out on their own how to get to and from work each day. This was Center City, not Pierre, South Dakota—there were myriad parking garages and taxis as well as innumerable mass transit, biking and walking options.

Our process was fairly straightforward. We notified people with current on-street spaces (271 personal vehicles and 92 City vehicles) of approaching changes and new policies being developed that would require a formal application process. On a related note, we developed a brief application and wrote up a review process for on-street parking for personal vehicles. Employees were asked to apply to their department head with an explanation of why they needed parking. We had departmental commissioners provide the first level of review, which they then passed along to a review committee—comprising representatives from the Managing Director’s Office, the Office of Fleet Management and the Department of Public Property—who decided which employees met the new criteria. Employees were also allowed to appeal to the Managing Director if they felt it was warranted. Another lesson learned: even though parking was sort of a big deal to people, it wasn’t that big a deal when you took the personal politics out of who received a spot and replaced it with a clear policy with an easy-to-remember tagline.

Next up was the City Council. The office of the council president (Councilwoman Anna Verna) was in charge of distributing parking assignments among members and staff, so we sat with one of her staff members briefly to discuss the issues. This staff member immediately understood what we were trying to do and agreed that some changes were needed. However, that didn’t mean

we'd be able to push everything through. While the City Council's parking space complement wasn't reduced, we were able to streamline the process by which privileges were granted, and we made it easier to monitor who had credentials. We created a sticker-based identification program for all other city employees, but for the City Council we created a portable placard that made it easier for different people and cars to use the spaces. Given that council offices had multiple staff people coming and going as well as visitors, this more flexible system made sense and was well-received.

Through our work with the council, we realized that one challenging aspect of their parking complement was that spots weren't well-marked and were therefore more difficult to secure. This led to the development of better mapping, on-street marking and signage that helped more clearly identify who had permission to park and where.

Another idea struck us: If city employees and council members were having such a difficult time getting into their parking spaces, what about residents and taxpayers looking to park downtown to do City business in the Municipal Services Building (MSB) or elsewhere? We quickly selected 15th Street between Arch Street and John F. Kennedy Boulevard for new public parking, because it was mainly filled with city parking for city employees but we were in the process of reducing the number of such spots. Also, it was near both accessible

entrances to the MSB, where most permits, tax documents and other operational issues were managed, and the crosswalk to City Hall was close for all other needs. We removed all city employee parking in that area, put up signs saying that the parking was available to "customers of government" and metered the zone with new multi-space parking meters so that citizens could come, easily pay for parking, do their business and leave. The Parking Authority estimates that this area has brought in about \$200,000 in revenue annually over the past four years (\$800,000).

While we were working with the Parking Authority to open up more public parking, we realized that they were natural partners for the enforcement of all parking in the area where permits had been given to the City Council, city employees and staff. Police had been using their resources to assist with parking in the mornings, but we felt it was better to give them the flexibility to redeploy their unit elsewhere and allow the Parking Authority to monitor these new policies and procedures. The Parking Authority was somewhat cautious in accepting this new role because enforcing parking for elected and city officials can be a sticky job for an organization that is quite on top of their enforcement game; but they came on board and made a difficult job look easy.

While the on-street parking process was unfolding, we found another parking issue related to off-street parking

in garages for our vehicles. These city vehicles, and some personal vehicles used for work, needed to be placed somewhere during the day and at the end of the day when duties didn't justify take-home privileges. These vehicles were placed in parking garages. Much like with on-street parking, there really hadn't been a well-developed review of these types of vehicles. We did an audit and found 485 vehicles being parked in 15 different lots with differing rates, at a cost to taxpayers of about \$970,000 annually (about \$167 per space per month). The Department of Public Property had been overseeing the program but hadn't been given any discretion in asking questions. So together with them and the Office of Fleet Management, we started inspecting some of the sites to find the license plates (or cars) parked in these various assigned monthly parking spots. We discovered that dust had accumulated on some while others were no longer being parked. We immediately asked department heads to review our lists of current permits and vehicles and to respond with their actual needs. They were asked to consider new options for car sharing (with ZipCar at the time) and new standards for what constitutes a take-home privilege need, using new guidelines for reviewing the number of historical emergency response needs and number of necessary units per response. The review committee was instantaneously surprised at the reduction efforts made by city departments.

The City saw a reduction of almost 750 vehicles going

home each night, translating into savings of more than \$200,000 in fuel costs alone. Additionally, the number of vehicles required to do business quickly dropped by roughly 430 underutilized vehicles, which were sold at auction or used as replacement vehicles on other assignments. Not to mention that departments were now using new car-sharing contracts for necessary business instead of requiring the City to pay for maintenance, licensing, registration and insurance on the relinquished vehicles.

When all was said and done, parking turned out to be one of the biggest symbolic problems we've ever worked on. A handful of veteran employees suggested we stay far away from it—it wasn't going to win us any favors. But we were eager to prove that change can happen quickly and in a meaningful way, even if it is only symbolic. After all, symbols can be helpful when you don't want to embarrassingly walk into the wrong bathroom, but dangerous when they grow to mean more than they should. With the support of the administration and with the taxpayers in mind, we were able to make symbolic and substantive changes and make our government work smarter, faster and better.