

CASE STUDY

Charlotte's Park It! Program has grown and changed with transportation trends to serve city residents and guests beautifully.

Charlotte, N.C., is a captivating, colorful, and cosmopolitan city. Center city has three professional sports teams, world-class exhibits at numerous museums, and many nightspots through its two-square-mile area. Several Fortune 500 companies are headquartered in Charlotte's center city and the city boasts the third most banking assets in the U.S. after New York City and San Francisco, Calif. The University of North Carolina, Charlotte, and Johnson and Wales University have campuses in center city, which also has more than 18,000 residents and 100,000 workers. Charlotte is home to the NASCAR Hall of Fame and enjoys a new 5.4-acre public park.

Charlotte is a dynamic, vibrant exciting city full of growth and potential, but it wasn't always like this. Come with us on a brief flashback.

The Evolution of Urban Parking

By Clement Gibson, CAPP,
and Randy Jones

We Don't Need Parking Management

In 1974, when Randy Jones (co-author of this article) began working for the city, Charlotte was much smaller and less active. One of my first responsibilities was to remove all of the remaining parking meters, which were installed in the 1950s, from center city. At that time, Charlotte had a population of about 235,000, (it now has an estimated 842,000 residents). Due to the number of projects planned for center city, the city's





Charlotte's Park It! program has revolutionized parking in the city center.

PHOTO CREDIT: CHARLOTTE CENTER CITY PARTNERS

traffic engineers felt it was necessary to remove all on-street parking to handle the anticipated volumes of traffic. Although freeways had been built circling center city, expanding streets within the central core was not possible. One of my first assignments was to remove the remaining 75 meters. Some of them were still penny meters!

By removing the last meters, Charlotte was

essentially left with no parking program. The city had little on-street parking, and the only garage it owned was a facility for employees at city hall. Any new growth was expected to develop parking sufficient for its own needs.

In the 1970s and 1980s, this philosophy worked. There were vacant lots adjacent to center city and new garages being built as part of the new buildings, and this was sufficient to meet the central area's parking needs.



PHOTO CREDIT: CHARLOTTE CITY CENTER PARTNERS

Perhaps We Misspoke

By the late 1980s, it became evident that parking needs were not being met. New buildings, many of which were for banking headquarters, provided sufficient parking for their employees and direct customers, but parking was becoming scarce for transient customers for the area's small businesses, restaurants, and shops. As the center city population grew, parking on peripheral lots began to disappear.

Planners began to look to the future to try to create a center city that had more than just a daytime population. Center city housing was planned, and nightlife with restaurants and clubs was desired. Removing the meters and on-street parking worked well in a sense; it got the center city workers to their jobs in the morning and made it easy for them to get back to their homes

in the suburbs at 5 o'clock every day. Center city was left empty when the workday ended.

To handle the deficit in transient parking for city visitors, planners recommended that four 500-car garages be built in each quadrant of center city, at a cost of \$20 million. Transportation planners suggested an alternative that could kill two birds with one stone. Instead of spending \$20 million, spend only about \$500,000 to reinstall about 1,200 on-street parking meters and enact enforced, peak-period parking restrictions on key streets. This would satisfy transient parking needs.

Placing parking back on the street also satisfied the planners' objective of making the center city look more urban, like New York City, instead of just a bunch of 30-story glass boxes filled with workers from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Except for peak rush periods

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when parking restrictions were in place, the traffic seemed to move slower and be part of the center city fabric.

Soon after, Park It! was born.

Park It!

In the mid-1990s when it became evident that Charlotte had to develop a parking program to manage its new meters, many cities across the country were experiencing financial difficulties. The city was reluctant to add the 10 to 15 new employees the parking program would require; it would also bring a long-term effect of pension and benefit requirements. The decision was made to outsource the management of the new program—it would be one of the first in the U.S. to operate in that manner.

City management and staff were at first skeptical this would

work. How would a contractor be controlled? In the public arena where customer service is so important—probably even more so than revenue—how could a private contractor provide the expected and necessary level of customer service?

As it turns out, a private contractor probably managed things better than city employees could have. The private contractor was not encumbered with local government rules and regulations and had technical parking expertise the city did not. And there was less red tape to manage in this situation. The first project manager, for example, was replaced after several months when city staff felt he didn't provide adequate service levels. This could never have happened if the manager of Park It! had been a city employee.

In addition to buying equipment, hiring, and training, a \$40,000 public information campaign was developed. Although



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this seemed very unusual to city staff, the campaign developed the needed look and feel of the program. This is where the name and logo of the program were developed, along with the theme, “Taking It to the Street,” which was a take-off of the Doobie Brothers’ popular hit.

Smashing Success

The program was called a “smashing success” 15 months after the meters were installed. While the program was not intended to be a money maker, it did earn a little extra revenue that was invested back into transportation safety projects.

Businesses found that shoppers and other visitors preferred the dash-in and dash-out convenience of the on-street parking meters. Not only did center city look more alive, it actually was more alive.

Program Milestones

During the next 20 years of on-street parking, the Park It! program continued to stay on the cutting-edge. In 1998, Charlotte was one of the first cities in the country to accept parking ticket payments via the internet. This was an effort to make local government more accessible to the public.

The Charlotte Coin, a \$1 token accepted at the meters, was part of the program’s validation program. Businesses that participated in the program displayed a Park It! symbol and gave the token to their patrons for short-term parking. Charlotte’s Park It! Program received IPI’s prestigious Award of Excellence at the 2000 IPI Conference & Expo. The plans were to mint a new token each year to reflect the rich history of the city. The city also minted a .999 fine silver coin with the same designs. As might be expected, Queen Charlotte adorned the first coins.

In 2006, it became obvious that fewer people were carrying coins with them out of habit. Technology had advanced, and there were new products on the market that took credit cards, and the city decided to purchase pay stations. The kiosk-like meters allowed credit card payments and were user-friendly. While there was a learning curve, the public liked that they no longer had to worry about carrying coins with them. Another plus was that the pay stations were energy-efficient because they were solar-powered. The pay stations were installed in the high usage areas of center city and along the main artery to improve the look of the city streetscapes.

In 2012, Charlotte contracted with a consultant to do a curb-lane management study. The purpose of the study was to improve motorists’ understanding about where and when parking was allowed, as this was closely tied to street sign messages. There were many demands for on-street spaces in center city for deliveries, along with taxi cab stands, bus stops, crosswalks, construction, space to park for building repair needs, and emergency closures. The city recognized how important it was to manage its right of way in a manner that served all users, and it won another Award of Excellence in 2013.

That year, Charlotte entered into a contract with a company to allow motorists to pay for parking using their cell phones at more than 1,200 metered, on-street parking spaces throughout the city. To add more time, customers didn’t need to walk back to their vehicles but could push a button when they got the 15-minute reminder that their time had expired. This made it even easier for the parking public to pay for their parking.


In 2016, the city and the pay-by-cell phone company launched a custom parking app for mobile payments—Park It! Charlotte. Motorists can use either the pay-by-cell phone application or the new labeled mobile payment solution. This was a way that the city could refresh the existing program and promote Charlotte at the same time.

In 2014, Charlotte found the funding to purchase new single-head meters as the existing single-head meters were more than 15 years old and needed replacing. The technology had advanced such that the city was able to purchase smart meters that accepted credit cards. Revenue increased by 35 percent.

Continued Growth

Center city and the surrounding areas continue to grow in leaps and bounds, and the on-street parking program is keeping up with this growth. SouthEnd is an area that is not in the center city loop but has been included on many occasions due to its close proximity. In 2015, after having the businesses in SouthEnd request meters be installed on one of their main streets, Park It! installed smart meters. Two years later, the need for more on-street parking has grown, and there are discussions of adding more meters.

Another area that has grown is NoDa (North Davidson), a popular arts and entertainment district located about a mile from center city. NoDa is a village unto itself with special on-street parking needs. A lot is going on in a very small land area. There may be a need to test increased parking enforcement in this area in the coming year.

As the city continues to grow, the on-street parking program will continue to respond. 

Special thanks to Charlotte Center City Partners for providing data and photos.



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