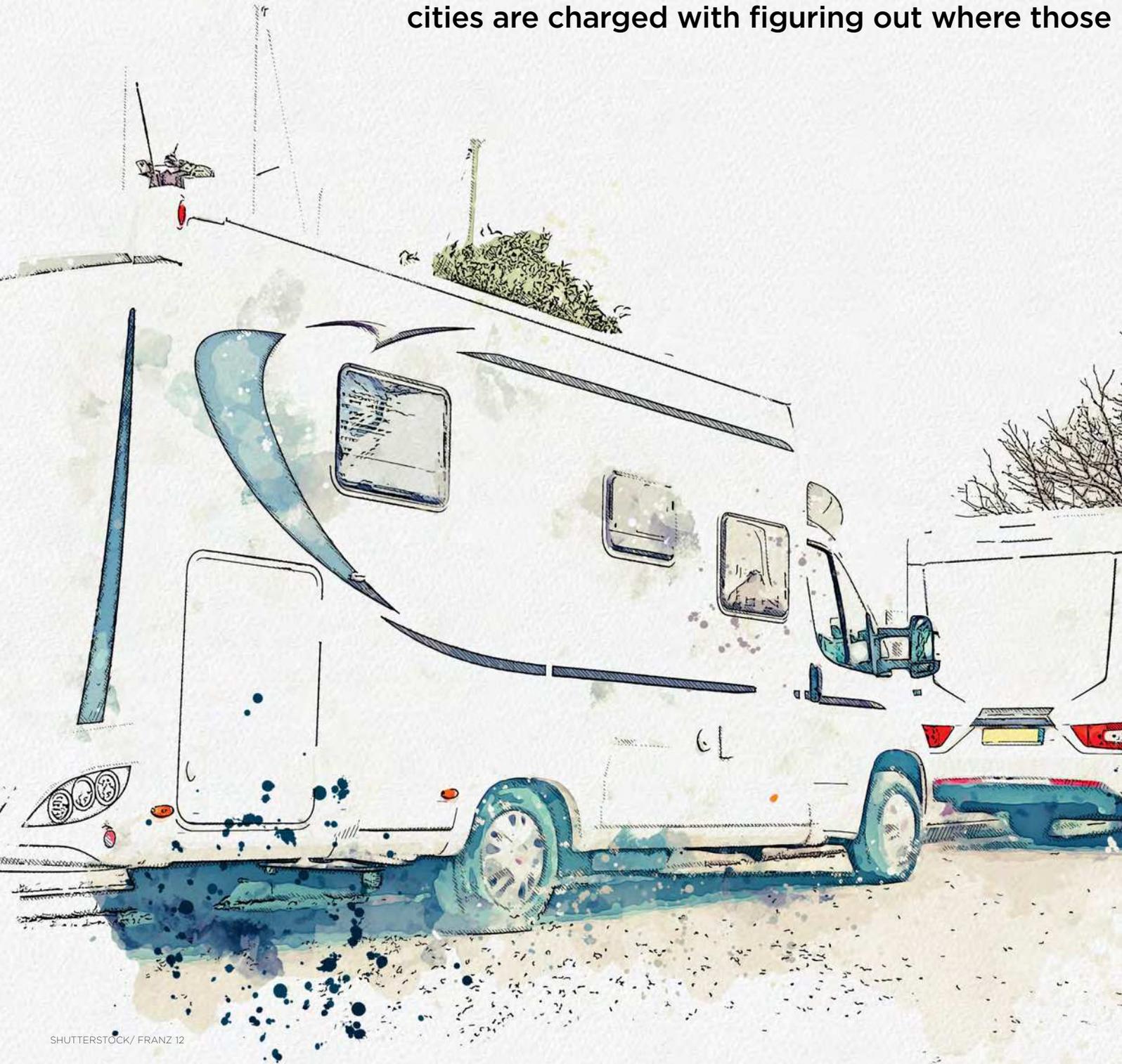


# Where Should

With more people homeless, isolating due to COVID-19, cities are charged with figuring out where those



# *the RVs* Go?

or embracing a nomadic lifestyle,  
living in RVs should park.



By [Christina Jones, CAPP, MBA](#)

**W**HETHER DUE to economic hardship or by choice of lifestyle, inhabited vehicles are becoming more common throughout the U.S. In some areas, the high cost of living or limited availability of housing drives the growing trend in vehicle habitation. In other areas, it can be the desire for close proximity to popular destinations or services that is the primary driver.

Inhabited vehicles include:

- Vehicles inhabited by those experiencing homelessness.
- Vehicles inhabited by those traveling for leisure, such as in recreational vehicles or converted vans.
- Vehicles inhabited by those choosing “van life” or “nomadic living.”

These vehicles present unique challenges for communities looking to balance the demand for the public right-of-way and equitable access to public resources. In response, many communities have developed policies and programming to address the various impacts of inhabited vehicles on the public parking system.

This effort is informed through interviews conducted with parking and transportation managers from various communities as well as research of municipal codes and available articles in the public realm.

## **Location Trends**

Based on interviews with agency representations from communities throughout the Mountain and West Coast regions, the location of inhabited vehicles is reported to be highly correlated to the type of inhabitant. Along the west coast, inhabited vehicles were most frequently reported to congregate in residential areas near the coastal zone, presumably in search of free parking with convenient access to beach areas.



Similarly, in other mountain destination communities, recreational vehicles (RVs) were found in residential areas with proximity to shopping and attractions. Users typically associated with these locations were RV and converted van owners who inhabitant their vehicle as a lifestyle choice, either permanently or temporarily as part of an extended trip. While this user group was reported to be least impactful in terms of waste, it does appear to be the group whose behavior is most difficult to change; this appears to be tied to the nomadic nature of these users—they do not intend to remain in the area permanently.

Those living in a vehicle due to economic circumstance generally were reported by interview participants to be in areas that were either close in proximity to social services or in light industrial areas where their presence was most likely to go unnoticed. Interviewed agencies with paid parking noted that inhabited vehicles avoid these areas during enforced hours. This user group appears to be those most mobile, moving frequently to avoid detection and potential enforcement, but predominantly remaining within the same municipality. Along with increased reports of waste and illegal dumping associated with this user group, abandoned vehicles that were previously inhabited but no longer in operating condition were reported as a significant cost for some communities.

Storage of recreational vehicles and converted vans was reported in some communities as having a greater impact on public parking accessibility than inhabited vehicles. Residents utilizing the public right-of-way to store large vehicles decreases turnover of spaces and reduces available inventory with each RV occupying space that could otherwise accommodate up to two to three standard-sized personal vehicles.

### Strategies

In addition to parking management strategies utilized to balance parking demands in core areas, such as paid parking and permitted zones, many communities also employ broader ordinances to address inhabited vehicles and the storage of oversized and recreational vehicles within the public right-of-way.

Some communities have addressed the issue of inhabited vehicles by prohibiting the practice within the agency's boundaries or restricting potential inhabited vehicles to specific locations and connecting them to specific residences. For instance, Adams County, Colo.'s Development Standards and Regulations prohibit the inhabitation of vehicles unless the vehicle is associated with a specific residence, and even then, is only permitted once each calendar year for up to 30 days.<sup>1</sup>

In another example, while the municipal code does not expressly prohibit the inhabitation of all vehicles

in Colorado Springs, Colo., it does prohibit the use of an RV as a permanent dwelling unit. City ordinance also prohibits the storage of RVs within the public right of way on a citywide basis. Outside of the expeditious loading of the vehicle, an RV must be parked on private property and is still subject to storage restrictions related to the surface material and location of the parking.<sup>2</sup>

In several communities, the use of time limits is intended to enable equitable access to public parking resources without the negative perceptions that may be associated with outright prohibitions on inhabited vehicles. With some feeling that such laws unfairly punish those living in vehicles for their economic circumstances, time limits are used to provide access to the resource equitably, without prejudice against any user type. In other applications, time limits are used to facilitate temporary access for these vehicles.

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The City of Carlsbad, Calif., a popular destination for those vacationing in RVs, developed an RV ordinance in March 2013 to protect access to the coastal zone for both visitors and residents of the area. Per this ordinance, the city prohibits parking of oversized vehicles on public streets from 2 to 5 a.m. Oversized vehicles are defined as those either 22 feet in length or 7 feet in height and 7 feet in width.

To accommodate those residents with oversized and recreational vehicles who may utilize the public right-of-way for loading and unloading or other short-term needs, annual permits are made available at no cost. These permits must be registered in association with a residence and the vehicle is permitted to park within 400 feet of the associated residence for up to 72 hours, four times each month. A similar permit is available for guests, allowing residents' visitors to park a recreational vehicle on the street near their residence for up to 72 hours, six times per year per residence. As of February 1, 2020, overnight parking restrictions were expanded to include the Ocean Street Parking Lot based on reports of excessive overnight parking at that facility.<sup>4</sup>

The Seattle, Wash., Department of Transportation (SDOT) has a more relaxed and iterative approach in

their response to complaints of inhabited vehicles. When inhabited vehicle complaints are received, SDOT's typical first step is responding by a letter to the complainant advising them that the city no longer installs or enforces overnight parking prohibition areas unless there is a business need for them, "as this simply moves the issue down the street." The letter reminds complainants to have empathy for those experiencing homelessness and that as long as the vehicle abides by the city's 72-hour ordinance and otherwise does not violate any laws, the vehicle and its inhabitant(s) are not considered to be in violation of any offenses.

The Town of Jackson, Wyo., implemented a unique approach regarding inhabited vehicles. The town has the second highest per-capita income in the country as of the most recent census reporting.<sup>5</sup> These high income levels coupled with a housing shortage have created an affordable housing issue for seasonal workforce of the resorts, where the median sale price of a home is \$1.3 million.<sup>5</sup>

In response, the town approved a municipal campground behind the Teton County Recreation Center in 2017. Spaces are reserved for those able to provide proof of employment within Teton County. In addition to a designated parking space, access to a porta-potty and picnic tables are provided. Access to showers and bathrooms with running water inside the Rec Center come at an additional fee above the \$225 per month, off-season rate and \$465 per month, peak summer season rate. Parking is not available during winter months.<sup>6</sup>

To avoid the storage of RVs and discourage inhabited vehicle parking on street, the town requires all vehicles parked on street to be moved at least every 72 hours, except as otherwise marked, with no overnight parking allowed on-street during winter months. The no overnight parking on-street policy also addresses issues with vehicles obstructing snow removal efforts.

### **Supplementary Services**

The City of Portland, Ore., developed a thorough policy framework with regards to urban camping and inhabited vehicles as a key component of the city's overall package of solutions for homelessness, which has emerged as a major problem in the area within the last decade. Through the city's Homelessness and Urban Camping Impact Reduction Program (HUCIRP), the city has developed programming for the cleanup of illegal campsites on public property and the removal of abandoned and illegally stored vehicles. An essential guiding principle to the development and implementation of the programs is that simply addressing the

complaints without providing support services to aid those experiencing homelessness and housing challenges will only push the problem to other areas within the city. There are several programs serving the HUCIRP initiative, such as the Clean Start program, the Portland Bureau of Transportation's (PBOT) Vehicle Inspection Team and Abandoned Auto Team, Operation Nightwatch, the Portland Police ID Project, and the Service Coordination Team, among others.

*In an industry often viewed by the public as immovable, outdated, and interested in revenues over customer service, parking professionals throughout the country have moved quickly and identified solutions to support increased take-out and delivery through modified curb management policies and infrastructure, redirecting parking revenues to purchase personal protective equipment for employees of area businesses and other resources needed for them to reopen.*

### Challenges and Outcomes

While the benefits of programming to support such reductions in homelessness and inhabited vehicles are widely recognized, the costs associated with administration and resources can be a barrier for many communities. However, based on data provided by the Portland Office of Management and Finance (OMF), there is a real financial return to be realized. Outcomes shared by the OMF concerning the Service Coordination Team (SCT) program and Clean Start program include:

- 30 percent of individuals who engage in Phase 1 of programming for 30 days or longer go on to successfully graduate the program.
- There is an 82 percent reduction in post-program arrests for those who graduate the program.
- 77 percent of all participants had reduced arrests post program.
- For every \$1 spent on the SCT, there is a \$13 benefit to the community in reduced costs associated with the crimes previously committed in the targeted areas.

### The Pandemic

As the effects of COVID-19 spread throughout the U.S., reports of essential workers electing to temporarily house in RVs to avoid exposure to their families

became widespread. In some areas, parking and code enforcement staff were furloughed or reassigned, essentially turning a blind eye to these activities in areas where such actions violated parking regulations. In other areas, city staff and leaders moved quickly to put temporary, flexible orders into place to support vulnerable and frontline individuals.

In late March, Fort Collins's city manager signed an emergency order temporarily allowing residents to use RVs for social distancing and to self-isolate during the outbreak. According to the order, the occupant of the RV must be parked either on private property with the property owner's written permission or on a private street adjacent to the RV owner's residence and not obstructing vehicular traffic or obstructing site lines of intersections or traffic control devices. The order did not permit the parking of RVs on public streets. Rather, it prevents homeowner associations from enforcing conflicting regulations on private streets during this time to promote social distancing and self-isolation.

Mark Standriff, director of communications for the City of Fresno, was quoted by Your Central Valley news in announcing an emergency order signed into effect on April 2, 2020: "They might want to self-isolate, but they don't have enough room in their house to be able to do that effectively, so the opportunity to either use an RV they already own or to rent one and to be able to self-isolate but still be near their family was very important, so that's why we decided to make this emergency order."<sup>7</sup>

This order allowed essential workers choosing to self-isolate to prevent exposure to COVID-19 as well as those ordered to self-isolate by a doctor or public health official, to park an RV on the street in front of their residence or in the driveway or other approved surface of their property for the purposes of self-isolation. The emergency order does not exempt others from existing regulations concerning the parking and storage of RVs within the city.

Agility, creativity, and compassion have been a recurring theme among many communities and their agency departments and partners throughout the pandemic response. In an industry often viewed by the public as immovable, outdated, and interested in revenues over customer service, parking professionals throughout the country have moved quickly and identified solutions to support increased take-out and delivery through modified curb management policies and infrastructure, redirecting parking revenues to purchase personal protective equipment for employees of area businesses and other resources needed for



them to reopen, as well as recommendation and development of emergency orders such as those identified above. This agile approach will be necessary as we continue to recover, and our transportation and housing needs continue to adapt to our new environment.

## Moving Forward

As parking professionals and local leaders look to address issues related to inhabited vehicles within their community, they should consider the various users effected and the intended outcomes of the regulations or management strategies being evaluated. They should not only consider the parking system's efficient use, but also the equitable access of this public resource for the community, including vehicle inhabitants.

Leaders can maximize resources available by collaborating with organizations having similar goals and identifying services targeted to the needs of vehicle inhabitants. This is a highly passionate issue for many, affecting far more than just the availability of parking supply or flow of traffic; as such, the process of identifying and evaluating appropriate measures to address inhabited vehicles should include input from community stakeholders at every step. These leaders should also leverage their parking and mobility networks and

reach out to consultants and subject matter experts for assistance. If this issue applies to you, know that this is an increasing trend throughout the country and your community is not alone in addressing the impacts and driving factors behind inhabited vehicles in the public parking system. ◆



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