

Changing the Conversation: from Parking to People:

-Walter Chambers

More Parking! It's the rally cry you will hear at almost any community meeting in Hillcrest. In Hillcrest, parking is a sacred cow, the Holy Grail, and the third rail. Politicians, in order to gain favor with their constituents, make offerings of new parking spaces. Developers are not only asked to provide parking per Code, but are hounded into providing extra parking for the community.

In reality, there is no parking problem in Hillcrest. There is plenty of parking. With well over 1,000 off-street, pay parking spaces coupled with thousands of on-street, metered spaces, parking is plentiful ... if you don't mind paying for it. The real parking "problem" is that people expect to park for free, and preferably close to one's destination.

As I sat in an outdoor Café at Normal Street and University, I heard a young woman exclaim to the person on the other end of her phone "good luck finding parking". Did she not see the 15 new, beautifully landscaped, metered parking spaces directly across the street – all completely empty?!

Think about what we are *actually* saying when we say we want more parking. We are saying "Come on down and bring your car!" We are saying that we

want more and more people to drive to Hillcrest and around Hillcrest. By providing cheap, plentiful parking we are encouraging more and more cars. It becomes a vicious, insatiable demand for parking that is unsustainable. At some point a decision needs to be made; will cars be the priority or will people be the priority. Both cannot be a priority simultaneously.

Personally, I prefer the term "car storage", or storing cars. Parking is a euphemism, not unlike "passed away". Parking is the storage of empty vehicles. And this storage takes up *a lot* of valuable, useable space.

Instead of talking about storing cars on the street, let's talk about putting people on the street. After all, it is people who fill the shops, restaurants and businesses. It is people who make being on the street lively, fun and enjoyable. And it is people that make our streets safer simply by having more "eyes on the street". Parked cars do none of that.

Cars are not the future of The City. Of course, cars have never been the future of any City. Those Cities who succumbed to that false belief ended up with lifeless cities of clogged freeways and

streets that have no people on them. And with rising gas prices and dwindling oil supplies, planning 21st century San Diego around parking seems insane.

However, exchanging cars for people is not as easy as it might seem. Hillcrest's current development model favors cars and requires parking.

Hillcrest currently looks something like this; Village Centers with retail, business and entertainment, which have little or no residential housing. Surrounding the "village centers" are medium density residential areas which have almost no retail, business or entertainment. Somewhere in between the two a few parking lots have been squeezed in. The perfect example of this development model is Hillcrest's central retail district at 5th and University.

Businesses have a high turnover rate on 5th Avenue near University. Some in the community blame the business failures on lack of parking. Actually, they might be correct. Because there are so few people living on/near this portion of 5th Ave., businesses are forced rely on people driving to the area. The key to thriving businesses are customers, i.e. People.

No wonder we need cars and parking! We have spread people out thinly and separated them from the services they

need, that people are required to drive to get to restaurants, bars, businesses, and services. And that's why businesses and community leaders are always calling for more parking! The very survival of businesses relies on customers being able to drive their cars to the village center and storing their cars while visiting the stores. It's Hillcrest's own version of the suburban shopping mall.

The solution is simple. Put people and the goods and services together so that people can walk, bike, and make fewer, shorter car trips outside their neighborhoods. Require mixed use development. Provide bicycle lanes, bicycle parking, and a shared bike programs. Improve the pedestrian experience, so that walking down the street is enjoyable. Provide more taxis and better public transportation to reduce the need for car trips. Provide street cars and shuttles. Society has put cars first for too long. It's time to think differently.

Attracting people should be the number one goal of any urban plan. Getting people to remain at their destinations longer would also increase economic activity and the attractiveness of an area. Instead of parking, the focus should be on people.

San Francisco has instituted a novel idea of turning a few parking spaces into a

small public “parks”. They are called Parklets. By creating more seating, more green space, and by making pleasant refuges, people are attracted to the area and stay there longer. While Parklets might not be a solution in San Diego, the motivation should be the same; to attract people and keep people in the neighborhood longer. Using parking spaces to help achieve that goal is an interesting idea worth considering.

A moratorium on the creation of “elective” public parking spaces would be a good start for Uptown. Parking spaces per the building code would still be required for new construction, but creating new parking spaces not associated with new building should stop. Only then will Hillcrest begins to show that it is truly interested in using its valuable (and limited) space for People instead of for cars. Then the conversation will start to change and the priority will People, not parking.