Over-Th-Hill Parking

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A great deal has been written, especially since the war, on off street parking. You have heard of the crying need for more off street parking in order to meet the needs of shoppers and thereby avoid a process of decentralization. Many parking authorities have been established and millions of dollars of public money invested in parking facilities to provide space for all comers on a completely unselective basis. In other words, all who have desired to drive a private automobile into the heart of the city have been encouraged to do so by the construction of such facilities regardless of whether it brought shoppers or not. There are a number of pros and cons concerning this procedure which cannot be gone into in this paper.

While the provision of parking space for all comers is highly questionable, it would seem clear that off street parking is necessary in this age to serve the potential purchaser of goods. The difficulty is to provide the needed facility in a location that will meet the need, and to limit its use to the shopper only. Other problems are allocation of cost of a parking facility, and imposition of such a non-productive function on existing land uses where high land values prevail.

Such drastic solutions have been proposed of requiring merchants, through zoning regulations, to furnish their own facilities. Such a method would be ruinous to most merchants and would be quite impractical to impose on existing patterns of business and land use.

It is enough to say, by way of introduction, that an ingenious system has been devised which meets these various objections. This system serves only shoppers, thereby avoiding adding to unnecessary street congestion. It avoids the use of public funds. Cost is born by those directly benefitted, and such cost is operational entirely. No capital investment is required. It brings into use low cost land instead of the high cost space in the retail district.

This simple but ingenious system was devised and initiated in Nashville, Tennessee by G. Vernon Pegram. He designated it Over-Th-Hill parking. Although it was tailor made for conditions as he
found them in Nashville, a description of the system is worth while as it may be found adaptable elsewhere. Thorough evaluation should be made of circumstances in attempting to apply the system elsewhere, as there are a number of factors necessary for success. In the following description of the operation of Over-Th-Hill, I will endeavor to set out these factors.

The fact that Over-Th-Hill is not now operative in no way detracts from the ingenuity, effectiveness, and value of the system, as will be brought out later. The circumstances which caused the closing of Over-Th-Hill were quite beyond the control of the operator, and were simply unfortunate.

The first important step in launching Over-Th-Hill was arranging for the daytime use of parking lots adjacent to the local ball park, about one-half mile from the central area. The lots, just over the Capitol Hill, were used for ball games only in the evening. Use of them during the day was arranged for at a minimum rate. They had no value whatsoever for others except during evening events at the ball park. Therefore, their use during the daytime provided an additional facility, bringing these relatively remote lots into direct service for downtown merchants.

The remoteness of the lots from the point at which cars are turned over to attendants is at once one of the prime advantages and one of the great disadvantages of the system—an advantage for the reason just noted of bringing additional space into serving the downtown—a disadvantage because herein lies the cause of an overhead in car handling far beyond that which is tolerable for ordinary venture capital. The overhead involved in this system makes it quite impossible that the system can be self-sustaining on revenues obtained from the users. The balance of operating cost above user revenues is supplied by merchants' subsidy. The manner of arriving at a basis for this subsidy will be described later. Actually, this system, in the final analysis, can be thought of as a merchants' cooperative, with a fee included for organization and promotion of the service.

In the writer's estimation, the system will find wider application and use if conceived of as a merchants' cooperative and is organized on that basis. I shall not, however, attempt to project this plan into such a framework. It is the scope of this paper only to describe the system evolved in Nashville. It is only pointed out in passing that if originally set up as a cooperative system, it is possible that the hazards which brought an end to Over-Th-Hill might be weathered, whereas to an individual entrepreneur with limited capital they were decisive.
Before Over-Th-Hill went into operation, 19 merchants had subscribed to the system. Of course, nothing was known of what costs would be, nor usage, user revenue, nor value to merchants. But these 19 merchants entered a four-month contract with the operator, agreeing to pay $50 per month each as a subsidy until a more equitable distribution of expense could be arrived at. In return, a telephone was installed in a prominent place near the front of each store, providing a direct line to the Over-Th-Hill dispatcher. The telephone was identified by the distinctive Over-Th-Hill insignia.

The cooperation and aid of city officials was obtained in making the necessary provisions for curb space on a public street where customers could come to turn their cars over for storage. Fortunately, there was a two-way street of ample width where this could be done without inconveniencing other traffic or interfering with other curb uses. The location was within two blocks of all important stores. Only two stores were at a greater distance. This location was also convenient for the shuttle route to the storage lots. Another important characteristic of the reception location was that it was immediately adjacent to a hotel, where an office room was obtained overlooking the place. In this way the dispatcher had visual knowledge of the situation at the pick-up station and could control the movements of cars and attendants by hand signals. This is quite an important point in operational control.

We have now laid the groundwork for operations. Storage lots have been arranged for; merchants have subscribed to the plan; and a control system has been set up. The elements of operation are naturally similar to those in a storage garage, but the details are adapted to the particular need. Let us see how the system works.

A shopper arrives at the curb at the pickup station. She dismounts, is given a parking ticket, and starts on her round of shopping. (For a time, the attendant who took the car would take the lady to the first place she wanted to stop before proceeding to the lot, but this was found unnecessary and was abandoned after six months' operation.) The attendant then drives the car to the lot and parks it. While the predominating movement is inbound, a truck is kept at the lots and when several attendants have gathered there the truck returns them to the pickup station. The dispatcher controls this detail by telautograph communication with a man who supervises the lots. In a matter of less than five minutes, usually not over three, attendants can be shuttled either way as the need requires.

When the shopper has completed her purchases, she calls from the telephone station in the store of a subscribing merchant. She is answered
by the dispatcher, who takes the number of her check and the store from which she has called. He relays these at once by telautograph to the lot. Within five minutes an attendant has brought the car to the store door. He assists her to load her packages, and then returns by foot to the pickup station. If the tide has turned and prevailing movement is outbound, he may be shuttled by truck again to the lot or he may drive an incoming car there.

The store door delivery feature is one of the most attractive points to the shopper, who may have accumulated several packages. She wants to stop where she is when she has completed her purchasing, and does not relish the walk back to where she left her car even if she has no packages. Furthermore, there is a definite advantage in maintaining dispersion in the delivery of cars. Congestion is avoided at the pickup station by not having to handle outbound cars there. Procedure is simplified by handling only inbound cars there. Also, shelter is provided where the customer waits at the store and could not be provided satisfactorily at the reception point.

The dispatcher honors no calls for delivery except over one of the direct lines from a subscribing merchant. This is a protection to the merchant. Also, delivery is made only to the door of the merchant from whom the call has come. This identifies the merchant with the provision of a desirable and convenient service. He finds this is a definite attraction in his merchandising plan. All merchants run a line in their advertisements mentioning their tie-up with the Over-Th-Hill system. This benefits both the merchants and the parking system.

The great appeal of this system for merchants was evidenced at the end of the initial four-month agreement. Records for those four months were examined to determine what the costs of operation were and how these costs could be distributed equitably. The telautograph control, previously mentioned, furnishes a permanent tape record of all cars stored, which provides authentic information on cars handled and the stores to which delivered. From such records the total volume of parkers was determined, and the number of calls received from each store were used to arrive at a proportion of cost to be paid by each merchant. This was accepted and subscribed to by every one of the original 19 merchants, though thereby the cost to the largest stores was raised to over $500 a month. An additional merchant also then joined the original group. The total subsidy by merchants amounted to the overhead for the system operation and was $3,000 a month.

This relatively high cost has been willingly absorbed by merchants because of the results which could be directly attributed to it. This type
of service fits the particular needs of the merchant and shopper, but it is not, by its condition of operation, suited to other categories of users. The high ratio of attendants to cars handled makes it vital that peaks of receiving and delivering be levelled off as far as possible. This is why the shoppers are ideal customers for the service. They come and depart more at random than others. And this is also why it was found impractical to accept the cars of business people, or clerks in the stores of subscribing merchants. They would come and depart within a short space of time, causing a peak demand which is uneconomical to meet with this type of service. Dispersion is necessary in the receiving and delivery of cars, both geographically and as to time, in order to require a minimum of manpower and avoid congestion at the curb where cars are delivered.

As it is, from 10 to 20 men were needed to handle cars. Much effort was made to keep down overhead. Men had to be employed who could come when needed and yet could work for a minimum wage. For this reason, students in business schools, in the colleges, and so forth, were used. The use of students made it possible to secure a higher type of personnel than would be expected by paying a minimum wage.

Considerable success was experienced in keeping down claims for damage to cars. Although $100 deductible insurance was carried, the only damages in 17 months of operation were for two accidents in which fenders were mashed. The greatest factor in this safety record was an incentive bonus. When an attendant had served 173 hours, the equivalent of one month's work, without an accident, a bonus of $5 was added to his pay. In case of any kind of accident, regardless of the amount of damage, it was agreed with employees that $5 would be deducted from pay.

A feature which was designed to reduce cost to merchants with increased use is worth noting. Under the terms of the contract, user revenue went back to the merchants after the first 6,000 cars were stored each month. The rate structure was $0.50 for up to four hours, $0.75 for up to six hours, $1.00 for up to eight hours. By far the larger number of parkers would come in the first category, so that when approximately 12,000 cars had been served, the merchants would have had returned to them the full amount of their subsidy. The volume never reached this figure, but substantial amounts were returned to the merchants.

In spite of the fact that upwards of 2,000 off-street parking spaces were put into operation after Over-Th-Hill started, it retained its appeal to merchants and was on a sound footing. But then one of the two largest merchants, who had started out to build a big annex to his
store, changed his mind and used the uncompleted structure for a 500-car garage. This was just across the street from the store, so it became unprofitable for him to continue to participate in the Over-Th-Hill service. This removed backing which could not be replaced elsewhere and made it impractical to try to continue the service. Had it not been for this untoward development, Mr. Pegram asserts that he would be in operation today.

Even though his system was unable to weather this blow, Mr. Pegram has done a splendid job in pioneering an unusual service. Although this service would by no means fit everywhere, and it was tailored carefully to fit the community where it originated, it is an idea which can be applied elsewhere and deserves the wide interest it has invoked. These pages have been dedicated to the description of the system in the hope that, where it is applicable, it may be applied elsewhere.