Gone Parkin'

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MOST people view traffic with a mixture of rage and resignation: rage because congestion wastes valuable time, resignation because, well, what can anyone do about it? People have places to go, after all; congestion seems inevitable.

But a surprising amount of traffic isn't caused by people who are on their way somewhere. Rather, it is caused by those who have already arrived. Streets are clogged, in part, by drivers searching for a place to park.

Several studies have found that cruising for curb parking generates about 30 percent of the traffic in central business districts. In a recent survey conducted by Bruce Schaller in the SoHo district in Manhattan, 28 percent of drivers interviewed while they were stopped at traffic lights said they were searching for curb parking. A similar study conducted by Transportation Alternatives in the Park Slope neighborhood in Brooklyn found that 45 percent of drivers were cruising.

When my students and I studied cruising for parking in a 15-block business district in Los Angeles, we found the average cruising time was 3.3 minutes, and the average cruising distance half a mile (about 2.5 times around the block). This may not sound like much, but with 470 parking meters in the district, and a turnover rate for curb parking of 17 cars per space per day, 8,000 cars park at the curb each weekday. Even a small amount of cruising time for each car adds up to a lot of traffic.

Over the course of a year, the search for curb parking in this 15-block district created about 950,000 excess vehicle miles of travel — equivalent to 38 trips around the earth, or four
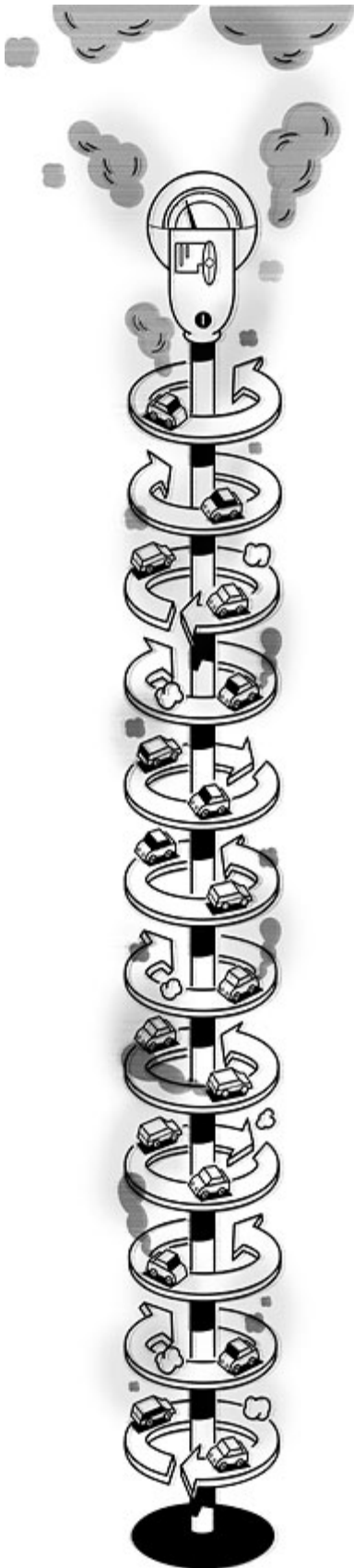
trips to the moon. And here's another inconvenient truth about underpriced curb parking: cruising those 950,000 miles wastes 47,000 gallons of gas and produces 730 tons of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide. If all this happens in one small business district, imagine the cumulative effect of all cruising in the United States.

What causes this astonishing waste? As is often the case, the prices are wrong. A national study of downtown parking found that the average price of curb parking is only 20 percent that of parking in a garage, giving drivers a strong incentive to cruise. As George Costanza once said on "Seinfeld": "My father never paid for parking, my mother, my brother, nobody. ... It's like going to a prostitute. Why should I pay when, if I apply myself, maybe I could get it for free?"

Like George Costanza, drivers often compare parking at the curb to parking in a garage and decide that the price of garage parking is too high. But the truth is that the price of curb parking is too low. Underpriced curb spaces are like rent-controlled apartments: hard to find and, once you do, crazy to give up. This increases the time costs (and therefore the congestion and pollution costs) of cruising.

And, like rent-controlled apartments, underpriced curb spaces go to the lucky more often than they do to the deserving. While the car owner with good timing can enjoy his space free or cheaply for hours or days, others who are late for a meeting or a job interview are left to circle the block, making themselves — and other drivers — miserable. The solution is to set the right price for curb parking.

To prevent shortages, some cities have begun to adjust their meter rates (using trial and error) to produce about an 85 percent occupancy rate for curb parking. The prices vary by location and the time of day. Drivers can usually find a vacant curb space near their destination, and the search time is zero. Cities can adjust the price of curb parking in response to demand to keep roughly one out of every eight spaces vacant throughout the day. Right-priced curb parking can eliminate cruising.

The balance between the varying demand for parking and the fixed supply of curb spaces is the Goldilocks Principle of parking prices: the price is too high if too many spaces are vacant, and too low if no spaces are vacant. But when only a few spaces are vacant, the price is just right, and everyone will see that curb parking is both well used and readily available.

Beyond the transportation and environmental benefits, performance-based prices for curb parking can yield ample revenue. If the city uses a share of this money for added public services on the metered streets, residents and local merchants will be more willing to support charging the right price for curb parking. These funds can be used to clean and maintain sidewalks, plant trees, improve lighting, remove graffiti, bury utility wires and provide other public improvements. Returning the meter revenue generated by a district to the district can persuade residents, merchants and property owners to support right-priced curb parking.

Redwood City, Calif., for example, sets its downtown meter rates to achieve an 85 percent occupancy rate for curb parking (the rates vary by location and time of day, depending on demand). Because the city returns the revenue to pay for added public services in the metered district, the downtown area will receive an estimated $1 million a year for increased police protection and cleaner sidewalks.

The Redwood City merchants and property owners all supported the new policy when they learned what the meter revenue would help pay for, and the City Council adopted it unanimously. Performance-based prices create a few curb vacancies so visitors can easily find a space, the added revenue pays to improve public services, and the improved public services create political support for the performance-based prices.

If cities want to reduce congestion, clean the air, save energy, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve neighborhoods — and do it all quickly — they should charge the right price for curb parking, and spend the resulting revenue to improve local public services.

Getting that price right will do a world of good.

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