

Testimony of Ward3Vision on the Residential Parking Permit (RPP) Program

Public Oversight Roundtable

Before the Committee on the Environment, Public Works, and Transportation

December 7, 2012

Chairperson Mary M. Cheh and members of the Committee:

My name is Herb Caudill, and I am testifying on behalf of Ward3Vision, a grass-roots organization of residents who advocate to make our neighborhoods even better urban places - more walkable, sustainable and vibrant. We want to ensure that D.C. grows in a way that is environmentally and socially responsible, positive, and progressive, while protecting the character of our residential neighborhoods and bringing the vitality of urban life to our commercial corridors. Ward3Vision works closely with the Coalition for Smarter Growth.

I am a member of the Ward3Vision Steering Committee, and I have lived in many different Washington neighborhoods for the last 20 years. I currently live in Cleveland Park with my wife and two young boys.

Why is parking so contentious?

Let's start with a question: **Why do we fight over parking?** Every neighborhood controversy seems to come down to parking at some level. Why is parking such a difficult issue?

This might seem like a silly question, but there are a lot of essential things in limited supply that we don't fight over. Take gasoline: We don't argue over who's entitled to gasoline or to how much. I can buy as much as I want, whenever I want. When I go to the gas station, I don't have to worry that they may have run out of gasoline because I didn't get there early enough. The same could be said of milk, bread, and clothes.

The difference, of course, is that **market pricing moderates the demand** for these things, but not for parking.

Here's the fundamental problem, in our view: **The District treats residential parking as if it were an abundant and valueless good, where in fact it is a scarce and valuable good.** We can pretend that parking is abundant when it's not, but that doesn't magically make it abundant, it just makes things complicated. We can pretend that residential parking is free when it's not, but that doesn't magically eliminate the cost, it just hides it in ways that are damaging: It incentivizes us to overconsume it, and then we have to find complex ways to ration it and limit access to it. The result is inconvenience and headaches for everyone involved. And the unintended consequences don't stop there.

What if we dealt with gasoline the way we deal with parking?

Imagine for a moment that each month the District somehow came into a lot of gasoline, and set up a “residential gasoline program” where any resident could buy as much gas as they wanted for 10 cents a gallon, first come, first served. What would happen? We’d all buy as much gasoline as we could, even if we didn’t really need it. The supply would run out very quickly, and we’d start fighting over it. We’d start having to ration it. Special groups would argue that they’re more deserving of gasoline than others. Worst of all, we’d be inclined to prevent new people from moving to the District - because they’d be competing with us for our sweet deal on 10-cent-a-gallon gasoline. All of these unnecessary conflicts and complications and undesirable side effects - why? **Because the government is selling something valuable at a small fraction of its true market cost.**

That’s where we are today with residential parking. We don’t have enough to go around, but we haven’t faced up to that reality, and that’s why we’re having this meeting. The reason we’re not having this meeting about milk or about gasoline is that the demand for those things is moderated by price. And that’s what needs to happen with residential parking.

The current system doesn’t work

I think we’re all in agreement that the RPP system is broken. We see five big problems with residential parking in the District today:

1. There are **more residential permits than there are residential spaces available** in many neighborhoods. As a result, for example, in Dupont, where I used to live, everyone wastes time and fossil fuels driving around and around looking for a spot.
2. **Zones are huge** and the boundaries **drawn without regard to demand** for parking, so very different neighborhoods like AU Park and Cleveland Park and Woodley Park are all arbitrarily lumped into the same parking zone. So you have intrazone commuting, and people from AU Park can drive to my street, two blocks from the Cleveland Park metro, and park there all day, as if it were their neighborhood.
3. The **cost is the same everywhere**, whether you live in a very low-density suburban-style neighborhood like Brookland or Chevy Chase or a high-density urban neighborhood like Adams Morgan or Logan Circle.
4. The **two-hour exception is arbitrary** and useless in most real-world situations: It’s more time than you need to pick up a prescription at CVS, but not enough time for dinner and a movie.
5. The system deals awkwardly or not at all with **visitors** - babysitters, houseguests, churchgoers, and others who have legitimate reasons to park in residential neighborhoods.

The solution is not to add complexity

How do we address these problems? **The answer isn’t to add more layers of regulatory complexity.** The current system is already a tangled mess that only a lawyer could love. We don’t need more special exceptions, special zones, carve-outs, or special categories of drivers. We don’t need more rationing or hourly limits or weekly schedules. We don’t need more indecipherable parking

signage.

Two simple principles

We believe that this doesn't need to be complicated. Let's start with two basic principles:

1. Storing my personal vehicle on public land provides me a **personal benefit**, and is **not a public good**. I'm not doing the people of DC a favor by parking on the street - to the contrary. So when I park on public land, I should bear the cost of that privilege, at approximately **market rates**, rather than paying a rate that's artificially low because it's subsidized by all DC taxpayers.
2. The **value of parking varies according to demand, which varies according to location**; so prices should be set zone by zone. But in order for residential parking zones to make sense, **zones should be small and/or homogeneous** enough to capture differences in demand from place to place.

What would this look like in practice?

Each small zone might have a base rate, based on demand. Everything else could then flow from that base rate: You'd have hourly rates and daily rates. **Residential parking permits could be reframed as a yearly pass** in the microzone of my choice, keyed to that zone's base price. If I occasionally need space for visitors, I could buy books of day passes at a reduced rate. If I live in Chevy Chase and I want to drive to Metro in Cleveland Park and park on the street every day, then I could pay for daytime-only parking in that microzone. Babysitters or contractors could buy daytime passes as well. And so on.

In some parts of the city, residential parking may be so abundant that market value of parking is close to zero; so the current token rate of \$35 per year would continue to apply. In areas with high demand, the cost would be higher.

This may all sound like it would be complicated to implement, enforce, and comply with; but **the technology exists to make this easy** and is getting ever cheaper.

With our proposed approach, the only thing you ever have to consider is price. You park wherever you want, whenever you want, for as long as you want - as long as you're willing to pay what it's worth. Just like you can drink as much milk as you want, as long as you pay for it. Simple.

Does market pricing mean parking is just for rich people?

The District should do everything it can to reduce poverty and income inequality. But the District doesn't have across-the-board subsidies for clothes or furniture or cars or gas or lots of other good and useful things. Should the DC government subsidize parking? Perhaps, but certainly not for me and my comfortable neighbors in Ward 3. And even for low-income residents, we're not convinced that that subsidies for parking would be a particularly effective way to reduce poverty. Surely there are more fundamental needs that we should be meeting first. We don't have enough affordable housing for *people* in DC, so it seems strange to argue that affordable housing for *cars* should be a priority.

At any rate, it's the current system that is profoundly regressive. About a third of DC households don't

have a car at all. The existing parking subsidy takes money from all taxpayers, whether they drive or not, and effectively redistributes it to car owners in proportion to the number of cars they own. That's not fair and it's not right.

Accurate pricing = better incentives = improved quality of life for everyone

We're not anti-car - most of us own and drive cars. But the current RPP system actively incentivizes more car ownership and more driving. Those incentives need to be reversed. Two personal cases in point:

1. My own family gets by on one car. We've often thought about buying a second car. So far we haven't, for a variety of reasons. But the cost of *storing* the car has never been a consideration in that decision. Why would it, when we can store the car on public land for practically nothing?
2. On my block, almost every house has a garage designed to house a car. *Not a single one* of those garages, including my own, ever has a car in it. We all keep our cars on the street, and use our garages for bikes and tools and junk. Why shouldn't we, when we can store our cars on public land for practically nothing?

More accurate pricing for residential parking would encourage individuals to find alternatives to owning a car; it would encourage families to own only as many cars as they need; and it would encourage people who have off-street parking to use it. All of this would result in fewer cars parked on the street, so that when you do need to park, you can.

Imagine a city where every single block has a parking spot or two available, so when you do need to park you can always find a space, anywhere, any time of day or day of the week. **Parking karma for everyone.** That sounds like a fantasy, but it doesn't have to be. Because of market pricing, every gas station has gas, and every grocery store has milk and bread, and so on. We take this for granted, but we shouldn't.

With more accurate pricing, we can get there with parking as well. And in the process we can eliminate the underlying cause of so much of the neighborhood conflict and rancor we have over growth and development, and make DC a happier and more attractive and more livable place.