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Less Driving, More Walking — Better Downtown Economies: Cameron on Transportation

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Our love affair with the automobile depends on one thing: free parking.

After driving on our “free” highways, we need to park somewhere, and we all hate to pay for the privilege. It’s as if there’s some constitutional right to free parking.

But free parking is actually expensive and paid in more than just dollars.

The industry standards-setting group known as the Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE) has defined 266 different types of businesses and determined the amount of nearby parking they require. So when

members of your local Planning & Zoning Commission consider proposals for, say, a new restaurant, they consult the ITE manuals on what parking would be needed.

A fast-food joint like McDonald's will require less parking than a fancy steakhouse, considering the number of patrons and how long they stay. But the rules of parking apply to more than just restaurants.

Consider convents. The ITE's "bible" says religious convents must have one parking space for every 10 nuns or monks in residence. Hello? They're in a religious retreat — they're not going anywhere! Wouldn't it be more appropriate for the convent to use its land for better purposes than an empty parking lot?

Then there are hotels. Their parking regulations are based on the assumption all of their rooms are booked, something that may not happen very much. Wouldn't it be easier for the hotel to make special arrangements on those booked nights than have acres of asphalt baking in the sun most of the year?

Drive up the Post Road and see the bitter fruits of this short-sighted planning. Thanks to zoning regulations, many big-box stores devote 60 percent of their land to parking and 40 percent to the stores themselves. Just think of about how that affects their pricing. It's no wonder Amazon can compete with them.

A while back I drove through New Britain, where I once lived. I hardly recognized the downtown with its empty stores and sidewalks next to a 10-deck parking structure. They built it, but nobody came.

If you look at the communities with the liveliest downtowns, you'll see people, not cars. People attract others as they go into shops, walk along and window-shop. It's pedestrians we want, not parking lots.

UCLA's Donald Stroup wrote a great book, "The High Cost of Free Parking," and made his point with a tale of two cities.

A decade ago, San Francisco and Los Angeles opened new downtown concert halls. LA's included a \$10 million, six-deck parking structure for 2,100 cars. San Francisco built no additional parking, saving developers millions.

In LA, music-lovers scurry to their steel cocoons and drive away after concerts. But after a show in San Francisco, patrons stroll the streets, spending tens of thousands of dollars in nearby bars, restaurants and bookstores.

The buzzword these days in Hartford is TOD — Transit Oriented Development. By putting stores, mixed-use office buildings, housing and amenities near train and bus stops, people will use mass transit to get there instead of their cars. That doesn't mean we don't need parking at train stations. But even a parking structure can have stores at street level.

City planners need to remember human beings come with two legs, not just four tires.

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