

CT's Problem with Turning Commuter Drivers into Train Riders Is Lack of Station Parking: Cameron on Transportation

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If we want to get cars off the highways, we need to turn drivers into rail commuters. But even the most motivated would-be rail rider faces an immediate problem: the lack of train station parking.

Many stations have wait lists for annual permits of more than five or six years. The permits can also cost as much as \$1,100 a year. Even day-parking is expensive and hard to find.

Most station parking is owned by the state Department of Transportation and leased to the towns and cities to administer. It's those municipalities that set the rates and handle the wait lists. But there's the rub: every town's rules are different.

In Darien, for example, just to keep your name on the wait list costs \$10 a year. But the prize is a \$400 annual permit. Most towns “grandfather” existing permit holders, meaning once you have one, you can renew it.

Since many people hoard their permits, using them only rarely, towns sell twice as many permits as there are parking spaces. That makes the permits really just a “license to hunt,” meaning you can park if you find a space, but there’s no guarantee there will be one available. That makes sense.

A beach permit doesn’t promise you 15-square-feet of sand, just access to the beach. As with parking, it’s first come, first served.

It comes down to a classic case of supply and demand. The demand for parking spaces is high, but the supply is limited. Because the state DOT isn’t adding more parking capacity at stations, towns are left to manage the demand.

And I have a great new suggestion on how to do that: a Dutch auction.

Parking spaces would start selling online on a certain date and time with the first permit going to the highest bidder. The second space would go to the second-highest bidder, and so on. There would be no preference given to existing permit holders nor by town of residency (all state-owned lots are open to anyone).

Using an auction where all bidding is transparent would be like selling an antique on eBay. The permit should go to the person who wants it most and is willing to pay.

Is it fair that somebody can keep a permit they don’t use just because they’ve had it for years? Shouldn’t that parking space go to the person who needs it the most — the daily commuter? The days of “hoarding” would be over if we let the marketplace decide the value of the space, not bureaucrats.

If an annual parking permit is \$400, I’m sure there’s somebody who’d pay \$600 or \$700 to be sure they got one. After the greatest demand is met, the average prices would be much cheaper, maybe even less than \$400.

And, by the way, towns shouldn’t be profiting from parking permits. That money is supposed to be spent on security, snow-plowing and station improvements.

Of course, the best solution to the parking mess is to have supply meet demand. We need to build more parking lots at all of our train stations. That will get folks out of their cars and onto the trains, benefiting everyone.

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