

Planning News – Commentary

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Tired of Subsidizing Transportation?

Of course you are. We all are. Solution: If everyone just drove cars, we could save taxes by disbanding the Bus system. No more transportation subsidies since freeway construction, road maintenance and vehicle environmental impact costs are already fully covered by gas taxes, registration and oil change environmental fees, right? Wrong.

The biggest myth perpetrated by freeway and car lobbyists is that car drivers ‘pay their own way’. They don’t, by a long shot. But the true costs of driving and parking are mostly hidden. According to the US PIRG Education Fund Study *A Better Way to Go* all taxpayers, even non-drivers subsidize drivers to the tune of billions of dollars a year. The report notes, “*Even if drivers were to pay full cost of the investment in highways, they would not even come close to paying for the full costs driving imposes on other members of society*”. David Shoup in his book *The High Cost of Free Parking* notes that “*gas taxes and user fees cover only 60 percent of the more than \$30 billion spent annually. Add on another \$68 billion annually for highway patrols, traffic management and accident-related policework. The estimated annual external cost of driving (including air pollution, climate change, imported oil security, congestion, accidents, noise, etc.) is \$126.3 billion*”.

As to ‘free’ parking, Mark Delucchi of U.C.Davis notes, “*We Americans spend about as much to subsidize off-street parking as we do on Medicare or national defense*”. A private sector example of the hidden cost of parking can be found at the state’s largest retail mall – Ala Moana Center. Circumnavigated by a multi-story parking deck on all sides, the center designates significant resources and personnel to lighting, painting, cleaning, patrolling and repairing this facility purposed only for the car. Ala Moana Center in part, provides this quantity of parking as it is required under our current parking regulations. The costs of maintaining this parking infrastructure is passed onto the tenants in the form of higher rents, which are subsequently reflected in the higher price of all goods for everyone. The price of these goods is the same whether one uses the parking facilities or not. I walk to Ala Moana Center, yet I pay the product surcharge to maintain the parking facility via more expensive products. I guess I could choose to shop at facilities that offer a discount for non-drivers, but I don’t know of any in Hawaii. And Ala Moana Center is not foolish enough to start charging for

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parking when its competitors offer it for free. So what is my incentive NOT to drive to Ala Moana?

Currently, free/subsidized parking is supplied to State and City workers at various government lots and garages. Why are taxpayers subsidizing State and City workers to drive and park in government facilities? The same situation exists with the free parking at numerous lots and street locations along the Waikiki shoreline from the Natatorium to Magic Island. Make no mistake, all of us (rightly so) are guaranteed free access to the State's shoreline under State law. But, this right doesn't extend to cars. I choose to walk, bike, or bus to the beach and I don't use beach parking. Why am I forced to pay for its upkeep, drainage impacts, lighting and security and conversely, why aren't the City and State charging market rates for these prime parking locations and maximizing returns to the taxpayer?

If we as a community want to 'reward' workers or provide an incentive for visitors to patronize various destinations, let's give out free bus passes or even implement a bike-sharing program like so many other cities. Let's try a free bus zone between downtown and Waikiki similar to those in Seattle and other cities. This may nudge quite a few people out of their cars. But until we try it, we will never know. We would pay for this increased bus service with the increased revenue from charging market-rate parking fees at public facilities and at street parking meters. When I choose to drive, I will gladly pay (or pay more) for parking on State, City land and streets as long as I can be assured I will not be required to pay hidden costs of parking when I choose not to drive.

Drivers argue that they subsidize the Bus, bike racks and sidewalk repairs with their taxes, and they do. We all do. All of us subsidize directly and indirectly all kinds of things we have determined as a society are 'public goods'. But here is the rub. Subsidies to transit, sidewalks and bike racks result in direct beneficial impacts to society and the environment as a whole, a 'public good'. Continuing to subsidize driving, means we are subsidizing detrimental impacts to the larger society and the environment.

By way of analogy, at one time a majority of American adults smoked. We realized years ago that smoking is detrimental to one's health. But smoking was an individual's choice. It is only after the dangers of second hand smoke and the public health care costs of smoking became apparent, that communities started to aggressively ban smoking, limit it severely and/or tax cigarettes exorbitantly. We nudge people away from smoking and fewer Americans smoke today. (Can you even imagine smoking on an airplane today?) Cars like cigarettes provide enjoyment and benefits to the individual but their use is detrimental to society as a whole.

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But of course, it is not that simple. Cars are not all bad. Most of us have cars, like having them, drive responsibly, and will continue to use them. Cars provide us with a level of mobility that could not have been imagined a hundred years ago. Until I sold my car recently, I valued the expediency and independence it brought me. But, I also realize driving is detrimental to society's collective health and my community's overall well-being so I am in favor of significant increases in gas taxes and vehicle fees if the money goes only to improving transit and other non-car mobility improvements. I specifically choose to live in areas where I know bus service is frequent, convenient and where I can walk/bike/bus to most of my destinations. My dwelling is older and smaller than it would be for the same price in say, Mililani and sometimes I tire of the noise on the Waikiki streets below. But that is the trade-off I have made. I seek neither accolades nor sympathy. Others prefer to live in more sprawled, quiet suburban areas with their 'tradeoff' being more time and miles in the car. Their choice like mine, is valid and perfectly acceptable. But these two locational choices are not 'equal' from an impact perspective. The detrimental societal impacts from the car-dependent community significantly outweigh the detrimental impacts of in-fill, walking-based communities. Should we somehow 'penalize' people who prefer the former? Of course not. But we should change our land use codes, transportation plans and parking policies to at least, favor the latter and quit subsidizing the former. The intent here isn't to ban driving, make drivers (more) miserable or pit drivers against non-drivers. The idea is to favor and 'incentivize' alternatives to driving and help 'nudge' drivers out of their cars. Here are some ideas:

1. Educate our community on the true costs of vehicle use and explain how we all pay hidden costs of driving and parking even if we do neither.
2. Remove all parking requirements from our land use codes. Our 'worst-case'-based parking codes have resulted in islands of development swimming in oceans of asphalt and requiring upkeep, drainage, lighting and security. Modern developers are savvy. Let them decide what level of vehicle parking they wish to provide, if any. They are the appropriate decision-makers for determining how best to serve their customers.
3. Start charging market rates for parking on State and City/County lands and in government parking structures.
4. Establish a free bus ride zone bordered by A'ala Park, Kapahulu Avenue, the ocean and Beretania/S. King Streets.
5. Eliminate State/County government (including UH) workers' subsidized/free parking and begin charging market rates at these facilities. Instead, issue free bus passes, free late night taxi ride home programs, etc. to all workers and teachers desiring them.
6. Start charging market rates for street parking meters and install street meters where market rates would be economically advantageous.
7. The average car sits idle 95% of the time. Implement car-sharing/bike sharing programs, especially in urban Honolulu.

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8. Implement the bicycle master plan for Oahu, right now.
9. Provide convenient, free and secure parking facilities for bicycles on public lands.
10. Require the implementation of 'Complete Streets' as approved by the Legislature.