Toward Car-Free Cities: The Inalienable Right to Park in Bogotá

By Darío Hidalgo  May 19, 2017  0 Comments

Cars Park Illegally in Colombia’s Capital City, Bogotá. Photo by Carlos Felipe Pardo / Flickr

“Toward Car-Free Cities,” a blog series by WRI Ross Center for Sustainable Cities’ Urban Mobility Team, explores the challenges and opportunities for Transport Demand Management (TDM) strategies. TDM focuses on reducing demand for private vehicles through combining public policy and private sector solutions. It is an essential component for comprehensive sustainable transport planning that complements public transit, walking and biking.

A particular TDM strategy, parking policy, is key for managing urban travel demand. This blog explores the current parking challenges facing Bogotá, Colombia, and how they fit into a larger agenda for expanding mass transit and improving mobility infrastructure in the city. Through the different lenses of New York City, Bogotá, Stockholm and London, the series examines the social and political barriers that cities need to overcome to successfully implement TDM strategies. The blog series also discusses the future trends of TDM and its implications, particularly in the developing world.

Despite growing automobile ownership in Colombia, only 14.8 percent of residents actually own their cars. This rate is especially low when compared with other countries: 23 percent in Chile, 24.9 percent in Brazil, 27.5 percent in Mexico and 79.7 percent in the United States. While a small portion of the population owns cars, parked cars dominate the streets of Colombia: on sidewalks, blocking bicycle lanes and on many streets despite “No Parking” signs. Every now and then I venture out to remind drivers of their wrongly-parked cars, only to receive strong negative responses. I got tired of taking pictures and publishing them on social media because nothing changes. A scarce police force in Bogotá attempts to control illegal parking, but the officers are largely unsuccessful. Recently, however, singed dressed as traffic cones have reinforced control, persuading drivers to park legally, with some success.
The parking challenge was highlighted as a global problem by The Economist, which suggests that eliminating free (or low-cost) parking is an effective way to reduce congestion, pollution and urban sprawl. They indicate that the biggest single difference between streets in Los Angeles, London and Tokyo is parking. While Los Angeles promotes parking, London has some regulations and Tokyo prohibits on-street parking entirely. For decades, Japanese authorities have requested proof of parking space ownership as a requisite for getting a new vehicle license.

What can we do to solve the parking problem? Trying to address this challenge through increasing the supply of parking means finding space for cars to park. This requires business, offices and homes to dedicate more space for parking. This option was appealing for and implemented in many cities, but the result brought the city even further from a solution. Large plots of land were used for parking lots around offices, parks and shops, making it increasingly difficult to access destinations on foot and by bicycle, and fostering environments in which public transport is very costly. This poses a great burden on the city, one that is well-documented in The High Cost of Free Parking.

Seeing as the supply-side approach is largely ineffective and even detrimental, I propose this alternative, three-pronged strategy: 1) Eliminate parking minimums, the requirement that each building should have a given minimum number of parking spaces and establish limits to parking supply in zones with public transport availability (already in place in London, São Paulo and Medellín); 2) Eliminate price caps, or limits to parking fees, for off-street parking and 3) Manage on-street parking and parking in city-owned, public spaces, including the use of variable parking fees (like San Francisco and Moscow).

Parking minimums make real estate more expensive and promote motorization. Therefore, zoning regulations that eliminate parking minimums make a big difference in reducing costs and promoting use of public transport. As a result of not having a minimum parking requirement, The Shard, the tallest building in London (with 87 floors), has only 48 parking spots. In Bogotá, where the zoning code requires parking minimums, BD Bacarat, the tallest building (with 67 floors), has 433 private and 334 public parking spots. The good news is that Bogotá is starting to think of eliminating parking minimums.

“Well-intentioned” price caps on off-street parking also result in the promotion of excessive care use, and have the unintended consequence of reducing parking lot availability. Price caps have become a deterrent to land owners dedicating space to parking lots. If price caps are set at a low rate, cars will take advantage of the cheap, long-term parking, leading to a loss in revenue for the owner and ultimately the closure of the lot. This has been observed in Bogotá since the introduction of price caps in 2003: the city has more cars, but the availability of off-street parking is down, to the point that parking lots are an “endangered species,” forcing hardcore car users to park illegally.

Alongside eliminating parking minimums and price caps for off-street parking, cities should strive to adequately manage on-street parking. A publication by GIZ, authored by Paul Barter, provides guidance on this topic. If on-street parking is free or managed informally at relatively low cost, we will continue to see cars on top of sidewalks, bike lanes and other forbidden places. Instead, however, if cities charged for on-street parking, parking would be regulated. Revenue from on-street parking can be used for enforcement and for improvements in public space and quality of public transport services. A conservative estimate for the revenue Bogotá could collect from on-street parking is around US $50 million per year. While parking-meters have been around since 1935, Bogotá has not jumped aboard the train, and is therefore missing out on a huge financial opportunity. However, plans for regulating on-street parking are underway.

Managing parking is a key component of effective and efficient urban mobility. If Bogotá wants to improve upon its current parking challenge, the city must work to dismantle the current parking regulations.

This was originally published in Spanish on El Tiempo and TheCityFix Mexico

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