

# Modern Mobility and Commercial Office Towers

By [Michael Cramer](#)

**A** YEAR AGO, this article would have contained a plethora of pie-in-the-sky ideas and innovations. Cars and trucks were changing, mass transit was improving, Uber, Lyft, bicycles, work from home—it all seems so Jetsons now. Millions of people now work from home and many don't like it. They want to come back to the office but are they a majority? Are they even a significant minority? Who will return and what ground rules will regulate their return?

In Houston's modern downtown, the buildings are still beautiful modernist works of art. The biggest names in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century architecture are represented. And yet, most of the buildings sit nearly empty, awaiting the passing of COVID and the restrictions it wrought.

## COVID Precautions

My own company, like many others, has implemented COVID procedures to assure employees that the workplace is as safe as possible. These processes are in trial phases and haven't been tested with a full load of employees.

Commercial office buildings are also developing their own precautions. Many buildings will restrict the number of people that ride in an elevator; an elevator that might have held 12 or more passengers may now be limited to 4. Buildings may create check-in points where people's temperatures are taken and health screening questions are asked. In effect, building entries may become choke points and to use a phrase common during COVID, we must flatten the building rush-hour curves.

Here is where our industry expertise can be helpful: We in parking are familiar with the morning rush. That's the period when as many as 70 percent of the building's population enters the garage. The chart below is an example of what happened during a typical rush hour period at a large urban garage.

Between 7 and 9 a.m., 85 percent of the garage's parkers arrived. At about 8 a.m., using the garage's four entry lanes, vehicles were entering at the average rate of 15 per minute.

These building employees then carry on into the garage elevators, the building entry, and the building elevators. Now, imagine what happens when we limit entry to the elevators and the building. The jam and resulting backup will be a difficult challenge to manage. "Flattening the curve" now becomes vital to the garage and as parking professionals, we should be participating in discussions about how to accomplish this task.

## Flattening the Curve

So, again flash back to a year ago and we are talking about EVs, autonomous cars, and other futuristic trends that will reduce reliance on single passenger vehicles. Things changed in the blink of an eye. Many experts believe that, at least in the short-term, we will see an increase in single passenger vehicle use. If that's the case, flattening the curve becomes even more vital.

Ideas to flatten the curve include staggered shifts, emphasis on alternate transportation such as bicycles, and continued reliance on stay-at-home, cyber-commuting. Cyber-commuting offers a lot of promise. One lesson learned during the pandemic is that some

Time	Percentage of Vehicles Enter/Exit			Number of Vehicles Enter/Exit		
	Enter	Exit	Occupied	Enter	Exit	In Garage
6:00	5%	0%	5%	88	—	88
7:00	15%	0%	20%	265	—	353
8:00	50%	0%	70%	883	—	1,236
9:00	20%	1%	89%	353	18	1,571
10:00	5%	1%	93%	88	18	1,642



people do better at home than others. Some companies can distribute the workload so stay-at-home is a viable option for those who can do it.

The cyber-commuting infrastructure was rapidly strengthened during COVID and there is no reason to dismantle or reduce its effectiveness. Zoom calls are great. At my company, we use Microsoft Teams and I adapted to it quickly. I can work with my colleagues in India; Washington D.C.; and Houston without a second thought. For me, going into the office won't change my work dynamic so staying home is a viable option and I believe it will be so for millions of workers.

## Planning

Garages can activate parkers' credentials so that their access is restricted to certain times during the rush hour. Beginning with the garage, parking managers should be working with building managers to create plans that flatten the curve.

Cities should develop plans to coincide with staggered shifts. For example, if fewer people take busses, reduce bus traffic. Rush hours that were once 7 to 9 a.m. can now become 6 to 10 a.m., so incentivize commuters by offering perks such as single-occupant vehicles on HOV lanes between 6 and 7 a.m. Enhance reporting systems that show traffic flow and using big data, suggest times when people should get on the road.

We are living in a transitional time. COVID has changed things. It's meaningless to me whether these changes are for the better or worse; they are here and as parking professionals, we have a role to play in creating an effective infrastructure. Office towers are the largest attractor for commuters. Even if we are in another parking vertical, office towers create a mobility challenge for our entire industry.

The lesson that has sunk in the most with me is that the future isn't an orderly process, and everything can change in an instant. Goals change at the whims of fate. ♦



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