The Motor City Becomes Comeback City

People enjoy the revitalized Campus Martius park in Detroit

Detroit engineers a renaissance after some very tough times and a global pandemic, and parking plays a key role.

By Bill Smith

IF YOU HAVEN'T BEEN FOCUSED on what's happening in Detroit, you're missing one of America's best stories. The Motor City is in the midst of a revival that has seen an eruption of development. Businesses are returning to the downtown, restaurants and clubs have emerged, manufacturing is vibrant again, and Detroit is well on its way to becoming one of the hottest tourist destinations in the U.S. The education community is also playing a vital role, with the University of Michigan planning a new downtown campus focusing on technology and development.

Just as Detroit's original rise came out of the automobile boom of the early 1900s, this resurgence grew out of the resurrection of the U.S. auto industry. Just a few years ago, General Motors and Chrysler were fighting for their lives and closing plants. Now both companies are opening new plants and reopening shuttered facilities.

Detroit is leading the way when it comes automobile innovation, too. The city is ground zero for the development of electric vehicles and self-driving vehicles, and Ford and GM are doubling down on the development of both.

It's no exaggeration to say that the Motor City truly has become America's Comeback City.

Parking's Role in the Rebirth

We associate Detroit's vibrancy with the automobile, so you might assume that parking is playing a vital role in Detroit's rebirth. If so, you are right.

"So much is happening in Detroit right now," says Keith Hutchings, director of Detroit's Municipal Parking Department. "The city has unique partnerships with the state, county, and private entities, and we are completely reimagining how parking and mobility are managed."

Indeed, Detroit's creative approach to parking planning has it on the forefront of the smart city movement. The city's parking planners are using a combination of technology and old-fashioned parking planning approaches to create a much better transportation experience while simultaneously supporting local business development and improving access to city services and activities.

Companies such as Quicken Loans, headquarted in the One Campus Martius building, are finding success in a revitalizing Detroit.

Being so auto-centric has forced Detroit to pursue creative approaches to promoting mobility. The city has never relied on mass transit as much as other cities; there are just the Detroit People-Mover and Q-line micro-rail systems serving the Central and Midtown Districts and two bus systems providing access to and from suburban areas. An important part of Detroit's downtown system is rethinking the People-Mover's role. The venerable system has traditionally required tokens or monthly passes to ride, but now the city is expanding payment options to allow riders to purchase daily, weekly, or monthly passes to increase ridership, and convention packages making it more user-friendly. Soon, visitors will be able to buy digital passes based on the number of days they are going to be visiting.

Micro-transit is also an important part of Detroit's plan. The city recently had one of the nation's most successful rollouts of scooters, including a pilot project encouraging private scooter providers to drop-off rental scooters and bicycles outside the city's central business district. The idea is to provide another way for commuters to travel between their homes and bus stations to promote public transit.

Parking Takes the Lead

Parking is the unifying element of Detroit's revival.

"The city administration is focused on parking," says Hutchings. "We try to manage the overall parking system in a way that promotes synergy between parking and other types of transportation."

That process will soon take a major leap forward with the introduction of the updated Park Detroit app, which will provide access to every type of parking in the city. Drivers will be able to use the app to see real-time pricing and availability information for municipal and private garages and lots, both large and small. The app will also provide availability and pricing information for on-street parking assets.

With the introduction of the new app, the city hopes to introduce dynamic parking pricing to encourage drivers to use lightly utilized spaces. The app hopes to eliminate long searches for a parking space and guide drivers to open spaces while

Detroit's parking planners are using a combination of **technology and old-fashioned parking planning approaches** to create a much better transportation experience while simultaneously **supporting local business development and improving access** to city services and activities.

encouraging them to park away from more congested areas, and the city expects to significantly reduce congestion and pollution on city streets.

"The app also offers special deals from day to day," says Hutchings. "For instance, if you are going to the entertainment and sports district for an event, the app can offer highly discounted parking and alternative transportation options. So, the app doesn't just provide access to transportation services; it also helps find better transportation options that will get you to your destination more quickly."

Ultimately, the Park Detroit app will manage more than parking. City planners see it as a centralized event portal where every event that's held in the city, whether publicly or privately sponsored, will be uploaded onto the

platform. The app will provide a single point of access where residents and visitors can access everything that's happening in the city.

"The app is going to provide parking perks that will promote economic opportunity throughout Detroit," says Hutchings. "We expect the app to give Detroit a competitive advantage over other cities when it comes to economic development and tourism."

Park Detroit isn't just for people with smartphones, though. The app interface will also be available on a special municipal website. Additionally, the city is adding 300 new touchscreen kiosks throughout the city with the same interface as the app and website so people can access Park Detroit as they travel throughout the city.

According to Hutchings, the app is also going to be

available on the dashboards of private vehicles before long. He sees it as a sign that this technology is driving the evolution to smart cities.

"We expect that Park Detroit will be available on the dashes of GM and Ford vehicles very soon," he says.

The rollout of the app was originally scheduled for the summer of 2020, but the COVID-19 crisis set the timeline back a few months. Development is complete but the Detroit City Council needs to give final approval of some of the operational elements and the pandemic has slowed the process.

"The app will be the right technology at the right time If the experts are right and people stop carpooling and using mass transit until the COVID-19 crisis fully passes," says Hutchings. "The app was designed to manage parking supply, reduce congestion, and minimize the environmental footprint of parking resources when parking demand is high. Park Detroit will prove its worth when people return to the city in their own vehicles to work and play."

The Changing Role of Parking

According to Hutchings, Detroit has changed its approach to parking in recent years. The city has sold all but two of its municipal parking facilities, and the parking department's focus has evolved to planning.

"In the past, we were primarily responsible for managing meters, handling enforcement, and running the garages," says Hutchings. "Now we are working more actively with local planning groups, building capacity to provide organized professional parking strategy for the central business district and other corridors. Our coordination with economic development personnel and the mayor's office is assuring that parking will continue to be an engine for economic development."

The city is also more focused on enforcement, particularly in business districts. There was recently a push to eliminate meters because their businesses and their customers were complaining about how many parking tickets were being written. In response, the city conducted a parking study that found that as many as 70 percent of drivers weren't paying for parking at meters, and 90 percent of tickets were for meter violations. Through the study, the city was able to demonstrate that the problem

Partnering with Private Parking

The private parking community is playing a vital role in Detroit's widespread economic growth. Private parking owners worked closely with the city to develop the Park Detroit app, ensuring it would provide universal access to both municipal and private parking resources.

"For Detroit, or any city, to truly be a smart city, it must provide the technological tools for people to easily connect with multiple mobility options, both public and private," says Kevin Bopp, vice president of parking and mobility at Bedrock, Detroit's largest real estate developer and operator of multiple parking facilities. "We worked closely with the city's parking and mobility office to help develop the first comprehensive citywide parking app, Park Detroit. This is the first of its kind in the country, and we believe that it will set the standard for city parking going forward."

During the past decade, the city sold most of its garages and other off-street parking assets, resulting in private parking owners and operators playing a more pivotal role in parking development when compared to many other American cities. In addition to providing parking for visitors and people who live and work in the city, developers like Bedrock are able to focus on initiatives that enhance quality of life and play a vital role in the city's continued economic development.

"The importance of parking to Detroit's economy can't be overstated," says David Rich, vice president of Rich & Associates, a consulting firm in the city. "Parking planning has played a vital role in the city's resurgence by making it easier and more convenient to get downtown to access its business and recreational and entertainment venues. The city is bustling today, in large part, because of the successful efforts of Detroit's private and public parking visionaries."

Recognizing that the visitor's trip doesn't end in the parking garage, private owners are pursuing creative strategies to help visitors conveniently explore the city once they park. For instance, Bedrock has partnered with multiple startups to promote alternative forms of mobility by introducing groundbreaking technologies such as parking guidance, pre-booking, autonomous shuttles and parking garages, and mobile payment apps to improve the overall parking and commute experience.

"Detroit is at the forefront of both the mobility and technology movements," says Rich. "It should serve as a model for the rest of the country as other cities work to evolve into Smart Cities."

In the past few months, COVID has brought uncertainty to the realm of mobility. As people travel less and work from home more, overall demand for parking has dropped throughout the U.S. But as Detroit and other cities begin to fully reopen it's important that they are positioned and ready to adjust to new telecommuting trends.

"Parking owners and operators should be prepared to offer a variety of options to meet the changing needs of our tenants and customers," says Bopp. "We'll need to work closely with them to understand how their parking needs have shifted and will continue to evolve. We'll have to tailor our services to ideally meet their individual needs."

"Now is the time to plan for tomorrow," continues Bopp. "In spite of today's challenges, we will continue to find programs and opportunities that motivate people to come downtown. Private owners and operators play a vital role in sustaining the vibrancy of Detroit, and it is incumbent on all of us to create strategies that encourage people to explore, work, and play in the city."

revolved around non-compliance, not enforcement, and convince business leaders to work with the city to change parker behavior and promote compliance.

This new focus has provided significant financial benefits. While the city initially lost revenue from the garages that were sold, increasing compliance by upgrading parking meters and improving enforcement increased parking revenue by $2 million—to $10 million—in just the first year.

For Hutchings and his colleagues in Detroit government, the city is at the beginning of a very exciting time in the evolution to a smart city. Detroit is already seeing the benefits though. In addition to increased revenue, city planners estimate that the focus on coordinating parking with public transit and other alternative transportation strategies has reduced the number of cars driving into the CBD by 2,500 vehicles per day, reducing congestion and eliminating the pollution those vehicles would have caused. And the introduction of the Park Detroit app will only increase those benefits.

At a time when Detroit is on the rebound, parking is playing a leading role in helping the Motor City earn its new nickname as the Comeback City. ◆

BILL SMITH is a contributing editor to *Parking & Mobility*. He can be reached at bsmith@smith-phillips.com.