

Eau Claire Parking Study

Executive Summary

January 27, 2025

Downtown Eau Claire has evolved into a dynamic city center with diverse offerings, including shops, restaurants, offices, residences, and public spaces, attracting visitors from well beyond the city limits. Over recent decades, the North Barstow District has undergone a significant transformation, while the South Barstow District has experienced steady growth through a mix of new construction and adaptive reuse of older buildings. This development has maximized land use but reduced public parking spaces.

Additionally, population growth, post COVID work policy, and the increase in downtown entertainment destinations continue to change Eau Claire. The remaking of downtown is also reshaping how the parking system supports visitors, employees, and residents. The City must continue to adjust because community parking needs are ever changing in quantity, location, and amenities.

Study Process

The parking study focused on community engagement and understanding the needs of those using and counting on the parking system. The consultant team met with numerous people to discuss parking in Eau Claire:

- North Barstow BID
- South Barstow BID
- Water Street BID
- West Grand Ave. BID
- Elected Officials
- City staff
- Citizen walking tours of downtown
- Over a dozen Eau Claire business owners
- DECI
- Public Open House attended by 25 participants
- Chamber of Commerce Breakfast on downtown issues
- Review results of 2024 online Parking Survey

The high level of engagement with those administering the parking system, using the parking system, and organizations that rely on the parking system for employees and patrons, allowed both the consultant and the community to understand the value that parking brings to downtown Eau Claire.

Initial findings and observations were presented at a virtual Parking Workshop midway through the process. The workshop provided an opportunity for the consultant to outline the current situation, define the needs of the community, and get feedback on future needs. The workshop defined the following priorities to focus the recommendations of the study. The Parking System:

- Exists to support the community and help make Eau Claire a great place to visit, work, and live.
- Promotes economic vitality of the BID's.
- Will be financially sound and self-sustaining.
- Provides operational excellence that minimizes user complaints.
- Plans for the future parking and mobility needs of the community.
- Is flexible to adjust as community needs change over time.

Findings and Recommendations

The recommendations that flowed from the community engagement and workshop are part of a comprehensive plan to reset parking operations to meet the demands of the changed downtown dynamics and to support future growth. The parking reset plan considers multiple aspects and links the vital connection between on-street parking and off-street parking. The inverted relationship between these two parking products is represented in the administrative structure, pricing, and availability of parking. Key recommendations include:

1. **Pricing Restructure:** Introduce fees for premium on-street parking with lower rates for off-street parking. This will encourage employees and longer-term parking in off-street locations and preserve on-street spaces for patron and visitor use.
2. **Simplified Enforcement:** Replace time limits and block face restrictions with paid parking, reducing public frustration and simplifying enforcement. A forgiveness program for occasional citations is also proposed.
3. **Integrated Management:** Unify on-street and off-street parking under a single leadership structure to ensure cohesive policy-making, streamlined operations, and enhanced customer service.

The downtowns' most valuable parking asset is on-street parking. It provides easy to use and close proximity parking for many downtown businesses and organizations. It is available at no cost to the parker but has a two-hour time limit. Off-street parking has an hourly or monthly fee with few time restrictions. This rate structure has created a market where the best parking (on-street) is free while the least desired parking (parking structures) requires a fee. Therefore, most of the community only wants the free parking option and considers the off-street paid parking an unacceptable alternative. This situation has created the perception of a shortage of parking, even though there is ample supply of off-street parking. Partly because of the pricing policy, 80% of respondents described parking downtown as difficult in the public parking survey.

This situation has also created difficulty with parking enforcement. The only remedy for parkers overstaying the time limits at on-street parking spaces is issuing citations. This is a labor-intensive effort with the outcome being the frustrating experience of receiving a citation. Parkers have actively worked against this system, requiring the city to implement block face parking restrictions to reduce moving vehicles simply to gain another two hours of parking. Block face parking has created more confusion and frustration for both parkers and administrators.

The parking reset recommends the highest parking fees for the premium on-street parking spaces and lower fees for the off-street daily and permit parking. This allows parkers to choose a parking location that best fits their needs for length of stay and price. Parking enforcement is simplified, with the elimination of block face rules and time limits. A citation is only issued if the parking session is unpaid. The recommendation includes a generous "no reason necessary" forgiveness program that allows for the cancellation of the occasional unpaid meter citation.

The recommended realignment of rates should help with on-street parking availability. Employees are encouraged to park in the less expensive off-street parking areas, maintaining open spaces in the premium on-street locations. More available on-street parking spaces benefit businesses and other organizations as their patrons can reach their location quickly and easily.

Off-street parking is managed by the Engineering Department and has successfully transitioned technology to support mobile payments and other customer amenities. On-street parking is managed by Neighborhood Services and focuses on enforcement and regulatory compliance. While the departments communicate effectively, there is not a single location for leadership on customer needs, policy, and planning for the future of downtown parking and mobility. On-street and off-street parking should be considered two pieces of the same puzzle and policies for

each should complement the other. The public should easily find answers for their parking questions, and a leader should be accountable to the community and City Council.

Strategic Impacts

Parking policy and operations have a direct impact on the city budget and resources that must be considered as part of thorough plan to manage downtown parking assets. The backdrop facing city leaders is the annual financial deficit for operation of the parking system and planned demolition of the two parking structures in the South Barstow district (Riverside and Gibson ramps). The parking operations deficit was \$350,000 in 2024 and will likely continue to increase with inflation and without operational changes.

The removal of the two parking structures will eliminate over 520 parking spaces and would leave a shortage of parking in the South Barstow District if not at least partially replaced. The cost of demolition and partial replacement of the Gibson Ramp is estimated at over \$20 million in the next four years. The Gibson Ramp site provides an opportunity to provide an improved parking experience, while also maximizing use of land in the center of the city. A mixed-use development on this site could provide parking for downtown to continue to grow, while also updating infrastructure. The Riverside Ramp site is a prime development location, with an opportunity for a mixed-use development that could include public parking.

Conclusion

A reset of parking policy and operations is warranted considering the recent changes in downtown infrastructure, work habits and business mix. Both the North Barstow and South Barstow BIDS are growing as community gathering and entertainment districts, with increasing residents and less Monday through Friday office employees. Changes to parking will be difficult and resisted by some members of the community. But with 80% already regarding downtown parking as a problem, positive changes will be welcomed over time as they prove their effectiveness.

It is important to give the parking reset a reasonable amount of time to impact positive change and to measure the effectiveness of the parking program. Part of the reset is enhanced benchmarking of operations and an annual report to City Council. The annual report is a great opportunity to review the successes and challenges of the program and make adjustments as needed. Similar to the changes of the past several years, downtown will continue to change over the next two decades and adjustments in parking policy will be needed. A flexible parking system seeking to meet the needs of customers and supporting downtown vitality is a critical element of managing a vibrant and evolving downtown.