

Final Research Report

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Client: Downtown Merchants

Topic: Auburn Downtown Parking

Executive Summary

This study was conducted on behalf of Auburn Downtown Merchants Association regarding parking in downtown Auburn, Alabama. There are many restaurants, shops, bars and other businesses located in the vicinity of downtown. These businesses have trouble reaping the true benefits of the area because of the parking situation. Owners feel that they are losing business because of the frustration potential customers experience when attempting to find parking. There are limited spots compared to the amount traffic Auburn experiences, especially during football season. This study was conducted to discover what people think about parking downtown, what solutions they would like best and what other feelings they have toward parking.

The data was collected by a survey created through Qualtrics. The survey was distributed by the group members' Facebooks and through the client's network, which made for a convenience sample. The research group collected data from April 3 through 16. We received 363 responses. The survey featured 25 questions created from many survey question types. Most of the people who responded were female. But, there was a split between the amount of people who were students at Auburn University and the amount who are not.

Based on our findings, people think poorly of downtown parking. They think there should be something done to combat the parking situation. While respondents had very expressive opinions when asked how they felt about downtown parking, this does not seem to deter them from attempting to park downtown. This is because of the distribution methods our

client used. Although our client was concerned about the amount of students parking downtown to attend classes at Auburn University, our data shows most students who responded never park downtown for class. But, the number of students who do park downtown relative to the amount of parking spots could have an effect on the availability of parking.

Our data also found most people park downtown to dine, with shopping being the second most common response. Respondents said the reason they are most likely to not give up on finding a parking spot is to meet up with friends. However, most said that if downtown was busy they would give up and go somewhere else with more parking. Most respondents would like to see the parking situation alleviated with the addition of another parking garage. In general, respondents said it takes them between six and ten minutes to find a parking spot.

Lit Review

Our client is the Auburn Downtown Merchants Association. It is the organization of businesses that operate in downtown Auburn. The association tries to encourage all of the businesses to work together for the success of downtown Auburn as a whole. The association was chartered many years ago, but has since seen a revival starting in 2009 and has been active ever since. It works with many other groups around Auburn, such as the Auburn Chamber of Commerce, Auburn University, the City of Auburn and the Auburn & Opelika Tourism Bureau.

Our client is attempting to address the issue of parking space in downtown Auburn. It is believed that most Auburn visitors and residents have a negative outlook on parking in the downtown parking areas. Some of the issues that our client is facing are limited availability of parking spots, limited space to add more parking, inconsistency of parking meter prices, and construction zones. The Downtown Merchants also face the issue of students taking up valuable downtown parking spots for hours while they are in class. Employees of the businesses do not have specific parking areas and are also forced to take up space downtown just to get to work. All of the above prevent patrons of the stores and restaurants to have easy access to the businesses. If returning or potential customers are unable to park nearby, it may be a lost sale for the businesses. Most of the businesses in downtown Auburn are locally owned and operated, therefore having just one customer walk away could be quite detrimental for them when compared to some of the larger chains that share the same area.

It appears that the Downtown Merchants are not the only ones that believe the parking issue needs to be addressed. According to a recent article by *Opelika-Auburn News* posted on April 17 of this year, the City of Auburn realizes the need to re-evaluate parking in downtown. The city began work on a parking study in February of this year that will come to an end this summer.

This study is the first to be done in eight years. Based on recommendations from the last study the current Gay Street parking deck and other parking lots around downtown were added. Some of the options that the city is evaluating to address the parking shortage include: a valet service, adding additional parking decks, more on-street parking and an increase in price in the current metered parking. The additional revenue from the meters will likely be to help fund the construction of a new parking deck, according to Assistant City Manager Kevin Cowper (Williford,2017) . Cowper stated that the parking study will also help the city to narrow down how many parking decks would be needed and where the best location would be for the new decks.

Method

To begin, we met with our client, Eric Stamp, on February 20, 2017 to discuss our research topic and get a basis for how we would structure our survey. After meeting with our client, on February 24, 2017 each individual member of our group wrote a series of 12-18 survey questions. These questions were turned into our professor to ensure that each member's questions fit the proper research format and that there were no spelling or grammatical errors. We also attempted to include a variety of question types such as open-ended, paired-comparison and likert scale questions. After we received feedback on our individual questions the group met to select which questions would be included in our online survey.

Our first draft was completed on March 6. This survey consisted of 24 question, which stemmed from two general research questions: "How can parking in downtown Auburn be improved?" and "How does parking affect customers desire to eat/shop in downtown Auburn?". We pretested our survey by allowing our professor, client and group members to take the online survey. This ensured that our questions were easy to understand, that our question organization made sense and that our survey did not have any glitches. We then met to revise our survey by making answer choices clearer, adjusting the organization of questions and cutting down the bulkiness of our introduction.

On March 20, we emailed our survey to Eric Stamp to get our client approval. We received feedback that requested that we add a question regarding reasonable prices for parking downtown and that a skip interval for students and non-students. We added these features into our survey and created a 26 question Qualtrics.

Once we received approval for our Qualtrics from our professor and client we posted a link to our survey of our Facebook pages. The link was shared on several Greek life pages and personal profiles. On April 12 our client sent the survey through email to 1,000 Auburn

residents, therefore giving us a convenience sample. The survey was live from April 4 to April 16, and we received 363 responses. Our group then reconvened to discuss and interpret our findings.

Results

Q1 - What is your gender?

Out of the 363 people that took this survey, 76.03% (n=276) are female, 22.87% (n=83) are male and 1.10% (n=4) are unwilling to specify.

Q2 - What is your affiliation with the city of Auburn? Mark all that apply.

Of the 363 people that took this survey, 50.41% (n=183) are affiliated with Auburn because they are college students. 10.74% (n=39) of the people that took this survey are employed by Auburn University, 44.08% (n=160) are Auburn residents, 4.13% (n=15) are visitors, 4.13% (n=15) are a parent of a college student and 11.02% (n=40) are other.

Q3 - Are you a student at Auburn University?

Out of the 363 people that took this survey, 181 (49.86%) are students at Auburn University and 182 (50.14%) are not. Our respondents were almost half from the student population and half from the non-student population.

Q4 - How many times a week do you park downtown to go to class?

Of the 162 that answered this question, we found that about 50% (n=83) of the students that took this survey never park downtown to go to class and only about 15% (n=25) park downtown for class regularly. For more specific data, please refer to the fourth table/graph in the appendix.

Q5 - Are you employed in a business located in downtown Auburn?

Of the 343 people to answer this question, 21.28% (n=73) are employed in a business located in downtown Auburn and 78.72 % (n=270) are not.

Q6 - How do you get to work? Mark all that apply

Of the 72 people that answered this question and are employed in a business located in downtown Auburn, 51.94% (n=41) drive to work and have a designated parking spot. 9.72% (n=7) walk to work, 50% (n=36) drive and look for a spot downtown, 1.39% (n=1) take a bus or transit, and 5.56% (n=4) selected “other” and responded that they carpool or have a friend drop them off. Half of those who work downtown rely on downtown parking.

Q7 - How often does parking downtown make it difficult for you to get to work?

Of the people 72 people that answered this question and are employed in a business located in downtown Auburn, parking downtown always makes getting to work difficult for 22.22% (n=16). It makes getting to work difficult very often for 22.22% (n=16), sometimes for 30.56% (n=22), rarely for 18.06% (n=13), and never for 6.94% (n=5). The data suggests employees find it difficult to park and get to work.

Q8 - What is your general attitude toward downtown parking?

All responses to this question were negative except for 15. General themes found in this data include: negativity, annoyance and frustration towards the lack of available parking and the time it takes to find a spot. Many demanded more spots or another parking garage. Some comments include the following: “I HATE it! It is a constant battle looking for a parking place and keeps me away from coming downtown unless I have to.”; “It's horrible, a total nightmare.”; “I rarely

visit downtown businesses because of the difficulty with parking.”; “There is not near enough for the amount of stores and restaurants that are available.”; “It’s highly impractical for a majority of people, if you have plans to go downtown from 9-5 better pack some walking shoes.”

Q9 - How long does it generally take you to find a parking spot?

Of the 301 respondents for this question, 16.28% (n=49) said that it generally takes them 0-5 minutes to find a parking spot. 43.54% (n=131) said it take 6-10 minutes, 27.24% (n=82) said it takes 11-15 minutes, 7.97% (n=24) said it takes 16-20 minutes and 4.98% (n=15) said it takes more than 20 minutes. It seems to take the majority of people over 6 minutes to find parking.

Q10 - Rank the following from 1-6, with 1 being the best time to park downtown and 6 being the worst time to park downtown, in terms of finding a parking spot during the week. Pick up the desired answer and drag it to the desired rank.

Based on the 298 respondents, 81.54% (n=243) said the best time to park was from 6-9 a.m. The second-best time to park, according to 40.60% (n=121) is from 9:01 a.m. – 12 p.m. The third best time to park was a close call, with 24.83% (n=74) that said 9:01 p.m. – 12 a.m. The fourth best time to park, according to 28.86% (n=86) is from 3:01-6 p.m. The fifth best time, based on 25.84% (n=77), is 12:01-3 p.m. 37.92% (n=113) said that the worst time to park downtown is from 6:01-9 p.m.

Q11 - How many times will you circle around until you find a parking spot when you go downtown, before giving up.

Of the 304 respondents to this question, 5.59% (n=17) said they would only circle around once. 60.53% (n=184) said they would circle around two or three times, 15.13% (n=46) would circle four or five times, 13.82% (n=42) would not give up until they find a spot and 4.93% (n=15) do not even try to park downtown. It seems respondents are willing to make several attempts to find park, however, they are also willing to give up.

Q12 - For which of the following reasons would you not give up on finding a parking spot downtown? Mark all that apply.

Of the 304 people to respond, 63.82% (n=194) said they would not give up on finding parking if they are meeting up with friends. 18.42% (n=56) would not give up for shopping, 41.12% (n=125) would not give up for dining, 39.14% (n=119) would not give up for work, 13.49% (n=41) would not give up for class and 17.11% (n=52) are always willing to give up on finding a spot. Based on this data it seems when people make plans with others they will not give up on finding parking.

Q13 - Which of the following would most deter you from parking downtown for class? Mark all that apply.

Of the 160 people to respond, 59.38% (n=95) said that higher ticket prices would deter them. 71.88% (n=115) said a more forceful towing system would, 55.00% (n=88) said shorter meter times would, 41.88% (n=67) said higher meter prices would and 10% (n=16) said other. Most of those who answered “other” said the lack of parking is what mostly deters them.

Q14 - If trying to park for class and downtown is full, what do you do? Mark all that apply.

Of the 156 people to respond to this question, 35.36% (n=55) said they would park illegally, 26.28% (n=41) said they would take the transit, 42.95% (n=67) said they would skip class, 35.26% (n=55) said they would walk from home and 10.26% (n=16) said other. Most of those who answered “other” said they would park on campus, be late to class or park further away somewhere else.

Q15 - If you had to choose between the following options, which would you choose?

Of the 298 respondents to this question, 63.09% (n=188) said they would park far away and walk downtown and 36.91% (n=110) said they would risk getting a ticket and park downtown. Therefore it seems based on this data that making parking districts nearby downtown could be an option to consider. Especially when considering the responses to the following question, question 16.

Q16 - Which of the following is more important when looking for a parking spot?

Of the 304 respondents to this question, 26.64% (n=81) said that it is more important to park close to their destination and 73.36% (n=223) said it is more important to find a spot quickly.

Q17 - When trying to shop or dine and downtown is busy, what would you do? Mark all that apply.

Of the 303 who responded, 40.92% (n=124) said they would walk downtown and avoid parking, 54.46% (n=165) said they would drive around until they find a spot, 30.69% (n=93) said they would try to find a spot and go home if none are available, 50.50% (n=153) said they would avoid downtown until it is less busy, 60.73% (n=184) said they would shop somewhere else that has more parking such as Tiger Town and 12.21% (n=37) said they would take a taxi or car service downtown such as Uber. Therefore it seems that many merchants and restaurants may be losing business due to parking.

Q18 - Why do you park downtown? Mark all that apply.

Of the 303 who responded, 31.02% (n=94) park downtown for work, 19.80% (n=60) for football, 74.59% (n=226) for shopping, 91.75% (n=278) for food, 46.53% (n=141) for bars, 18.81% (n=57) for school, 52.48% (n=159) for events and 3.96% (n=12) for other. Most of those that answered “other” said haircuts/appointments, exercise, church or that they don’t park downtown. Based on the data, the vast majority of respondents park downtown for food, followed by shopping.

Q19 - Downtown Auburn’s current parking situation often stops me from shopping downtown.

Of the 303 who responded, 46.20% (n=140) strongly agree, 33.33% (n=101) somewhat agree, 9.57% (n=29) neither agree nor disagree, 5.61% (n=17) somewhat disagree and 5.28% (n=16) strongly disagree. Based on this data most respondents say parking has kept them from shopping downtown. M=1.9, SD=1.12.

Q20 - Rank the following to denote how you would like to see parking improved, with 1 being what you want to see most and 7 being what you want to see the least. Pick up the desired answer and drag it to the desired rank.

Of the 291 respondents, 59.45% (n=173) answered another parking garage first and 52.92% (n=154) answered a new parking lot second. This data indicated that participants want to improve parking by adding additional parking spots. For more specific information, please refer to 20th table/graph.

Q21 - I have never had issues finding a parking spot in downtown Auburn.

Of the 303 that responded, 2.64% (n=8) strongly agree, 5.28% (n=16) somewhat agree, 2.97% (n=9) neither agree nor disagree, 15.51% (n=47) somewhat disagree and 73.60% (n=223) strongly disagree. Based on this data most respondents have had issues finding parking downtown. M=4.52, SD=0.97.

Q22 - Indicate the number closest to the word that best describes your opinion of parking downtown: Easy vs. Difficult

Based on those who responded, 21% marked their answer closer to easy, 39% answered neutral, and 40% answered closer to difficult. Therefore, most respondents do not believe parking downtown is easy.

Q23 - Indicate the number closest to the word that best describes your opinion of parking downtown: Convenient vs. Inconvenient

Based on those who responded, 29% marked their answer closer to convenient, 32% answered neutral, and 39% answered closer to inconvenient. Therefore, most respondents do not find parking downtown convenient.

Q24 - What do you think is a reasonable amount to charge for parking per hour?

Of the 302 who responded, 47.68% (n=144) said \$0.25, 29.47% (n=89) said \$0.50, 13.58% (n=41) said \$1.00, 4.97% (n=15) said \$2.00, .99% (n=3) said \$5.00 and 3.31% (n=10) said other. Most of those that answered "other" said there should be zero charge or it depends on the parking space. Based on this data respondents are happy with the current meter pricing.

Q25 - Should parking in front of stores be metered more per hour than parking deck?

Of the 302 that answered, 37.07% (n=112) answered yes and 62.91% (n=190) answered no. Most respondents are not in favor of charging more for closer parking.

It is worth mentioning that our survey has a confidence interval of 6 at the 95% confidence level.

Discussion

From the data we received, we concluded that people think very poorly about downtown parking regardless of gender, association with Auburn or reason for going downtown. We believe that businesses downtown are losing potential customers because of the inability to find parking spaces. Out of the 303 respondents, 80% (n=241) either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that the current parking situation stops them from shopping downtown. Our client expressed concerns about students parking downtown for class being a reason for the lack of available spaces. However, our results showed that most students do not park downtown to attend class. But, one must think about the small number of available spots downtown relative to the number of students parking. Therefore, even this small amount of students parking downtown could have a large impact on the available spaces. The few respondents who do park downtown for class reported that having a higher risk of being towed would deter them from parking downtown.

Some respondents stated that the lack of parking downtown reflects the area's inability to accommodate Auburn's growing population. In short, there are not enough parking spaces available, and this situation is causing potential customers to give up on shopping downtown. If parking is unavailable on a first attempt, most potential customers are willing to circle around two to three times before giving up. However, retailers would likely lose customers when people are unable to park after two to three attempts. It is also worth noting that very few people (around 5 percent) will not give up on finding a parking spot. This situation makes parking a huge factor in getting customers into the downtown stores because most people will give up and take their business elsewhere if parking is too difficult.

In general, we found that people were more likely to not give up on parking downtown if it was to meet up with friends. Perhaps there is a way to encourage carpoolers among customers such as a perk if they prove they drove together. We also found that respondents ranked dining as their main reason for attempting to parking downtown, and shopping was ranked second. This data shows that our client has a greater risk of losing customers because customers are more willing to give up on parking and take their business elsewhere if they are just attempting to shop.

In addition, we found that almost 50 percent of people said that 25 cents is a reasonable price to charge for parking. As one would expected, the number went down as the potential price went up. However, it might be wise for the city to consider different pricing during peak hours or an increase in pricing all together to alleviate the problem. By increasing prices during peak hours, students might be less likely to use downtown parking.

We believe that parking can be improved by making spaces available for customers, even if those spaces are farther away from the retailers. More respondents (73%) reported that it is more important for them to find a spot quickly than it is to park close to their destination. Making spaces available that require a short walk to the downtown stores will increase customers' willingness to park downtown and will lessen the chance of customers giving up on finding a parking space. This could greatly benefit our client by increasing store traffic.

Some of the suggestions that we believe could add these spaces would be to add one or more parking decks to the downtown area. Re-evaluating the current parking situation in the current parking deck and adding more public parking to the top stories of the deck could also be beneficial to the negative parking situation. The creation of a valet service could assist people that wish to park quickly and not have to deal with the hassle that comes with finding their own

spot. Another suggestion would be to re-evaluate and add on more on-street parking downtown. There are some spaces that are blocked off or constantly being taken up by large delivery trucks. If the blocked areas are taken away then the city could add more parking spots and be more economical with their spacing.

There are many other growing cities that deal with these same issues - needing more parking but not having room to add the necessary amount of spaces. One of the answers to this problem that other cities, such as Washington D.C., have come up with is to adjust the price of parking meters by demand. This would take into account location, time of day and other factors that would cause high traffic in that particular area ("In growing cities, parking challenges require creative solutions", 2017). We believe the city of Auburn could take recommendations from these other cities and adjust the parking meters during the high demand hours that we found were between 6-9 p.m. every day and also on days when the university brings in a large influx of people, such as game day. We also recommend coming up with a reward system for those who can prove they carpoled to the downtown area. Customers and even employees could possibly be incentivized to walk or carpool if they are guaranteed something in exchange.

The limitations we encountered during our research were mostly because of the lack of funding. We had to use only resources that were free. Qualtrics is a great tool for online surveys, but it was hard to distribute the survey to people outside of our personal networks, thus making us rely on convenience sampling. This type of sampling causes our data to lack diversity and to focus on a specific group rather than the general population. Since we were all female students, most of our initial responses were from other female students because of the way we distributed it (Facebook, GroupMe and other social medias). Our client distributed the survey to the Downtown Merchants Association. We wish we could have found a way to better distribute it to

the all those who park downtown. There also should have been a paper survey distributed to people in the midst of parking and utilizing the businesses downtown. A paper survey would have gotten people's reaction shortly after experiencing parking downtown. Another limitation we faced during this survey stemmed from our distribution method. For future researchers, we suggest learning from our limitations by distributing the survey in a way that would gather results from a more diverse group and distributing a paper survey to customers downtown. We also suggest conducting a focus group. In our open-ended question, "What is your general attitude toward downtown parking," we received hundreds of negative comments. These comments, however, were not specific. It would be helpful to discuss this situation with these respondents in person to get a more clear, detailed opinion and to hear what they want done to fix the problem.