

Sushi bar approach to parking policy

By PAUL A. BARTER
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SINGAPORE has had “parking crunches” in Housing Board estates and the city centre and disputes in landed residential areas. Shopping malls and places of worship provoke parking fears among neighbours. And eatery districts, such as Serangoon Gardens, have had their growth capped over parking woes.

No city totally avoids parking problems and it may seem small comfort that at least we don’t have parking murders, parking gangster turf wars and rampant parking corruption, as some countries have.

But internationally, parking policy is now seeing a wave of innovation, technological change and challenges to the conventional ways of doing things.

So this may be a good time for a review of parking policy in Singapore.

Parking policy has been a neglected leg of our land transport policy platform. As a result, it is not well aligned with our other priorities. This forces more weight onto the other legs, including the vehicle quota system, Electronic Road Pricing (ERP), and road building. And it undermines still others, such as public transport.

A better parking policy should not only address the complaints above but also help deliver more affordable housing and less congestion.

Does that sound too good to be true? As you may have guessed, achieving such benefits often involves unpopular steps, such as strong enforcement and parking pricing reform.

I think of urban parking policy as having three main “flavours”. Let’s call them American vanilla ice cream, European dark chocolate, and Japanese sushi bar.

First, the American “vanilla ice cream” approach. It is simple and sweet but promotes overindulgence, the full cost of which emerges only later.

This is the conventional suburban approach and it sees building more parking as the solution to every parking problem. Fearing too much pressure on the cheap (or free) on-street parking, every building is forced to include so much parking on-site that it is never full and it would be ludicrous to charge for it. This wastes money and space and promotes dependence on cars. Unfortunately, this approach is spreading around the world, even to cities where space is at a premium.

Second, the European “dark chocolate” approach prioritises quality not quantity. But it is an acquired taste – too bitter for some. It can also be difficult to create in some political kitchens.

Zurich is one of many examples, with parking policies that align with its pro-public transport, walking and cycling policies.

Parking in the city centre is

capped at the 1990 level, parking with buildings is limited, and surface parking is being gradually removed from public spaces. In Asia, Seoul is starting down this path.

Third, a Japanese “sushi bar” approach caters to a variety of tastes and to various budgets.

Here I am referring to market-responsive approaches. Enthusiasm in the West for this has been ignited by the research of University of California, Los Angeles professor Donald Shoup. Such thinking treats parking as a type of real estate that can be rented on a short-term basis, like hotel rooms and meeting halls. Part of this agenda involves easing the requirements for on-site parking with each building.

Another part involves “performance pricing” to keep demand for on-street and public parking in balance.

The “SF-park” trial in San Francisco is an ambitious example of this. Like Singapore’s ERP, it uses prices to make sure public parking is never quite full, nor ever too empty. It is bringing pricier parking to popular places and times but cheaper or free parking to quieter times and places (often just around the corner).

So why do I call market-responsive parking policy a Japanese approach?

Because parking in Japan’s large cities is mostly a market phenomenon. There is little legal on-street parking. The famous “proof-of-parking” law puts the onus for securing off-street residential parking onto the motorist, not the developer or government.

Only large buildings are required to have on-site parking (and even then, not much). Nevertheless, the real estate market has generally responded adequately. Parking is provided mostly by the private sector at market prices which reflect real estate costs. So parking prices promote low car ownership and low use in the inner cities where public transport is best.

What of Singapore?

Our current approach is a hybrid but it includes too much of the American suburban approach for a dense city which needs to

constrain cars.

Is it efficient that even shoebox units of less than 50 sq m must be built with one parking space (which consumes about 30 sq m when aisles and ramps are included)? Consider how much more affordable such units would be if they could be built with fewer parking spaces.

Is requiring every building, even next to an MRT interchange, to have “adequate” parking really in line with the goal of promoting public transport?

Is it efficient to have a uniform price (50 cents per half hour) across most of the island for HDB and URA visitor parking even if this causes crowding at many places and empty lots at others.

Is HDB’s affordable housing mission well served by having sea-



son parking prices that are the same for every estate? Prices of flats vary from place to place, so why not parking? The uniform price implies HDB parking prices are artificially low in central areas with expensive land and overpriced in outer areas. It also means that households which need a car but struggle with the costs cannot now move to areas with cheaper parking, since there are no such areas.

Could performance pricing rather than caps on growth be able to manage parking issues in and around entertainment and food hubs? Such pricing would have to extend into nearby residential areas, with residents needing season parking permits. This would not be popular in streets which currently lack

pricing but such residents might be persuaded by the promise that, so long as visitor prices are adjusted correctly, there should always be spaces available for residents when they return.

So what flavour parking approach would best suit Singapore? Less “vanilla ice cream” and more “dark chocolate” or “sushi bar” should achieve better alignment between parking and our other important priorities.

The writer is an adjunct professor with the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. He is advising on parking policy for cities in Indonesia and China.

This is the second of a six-part series by National University of Singapore academics on issues of topical interest.