

Do We Understand The Parking Problem?

By ALLEN VANDENBURG BRETT

OUR national affliction, an endemic *schizophrenia trafficus*, is apparently reaching a hysterical stage, or so it would seem from going over the pages of one of our leading municipal periodicals for the past 16 months.

One slight advance in the thinking is evident, but a 25-year perspective is necessary to record it. We should be thankful for small favors. Nowhere in these pages did I find anyone advocating meters for curb parking. Let us hope that the fallacy has fallen by the wayside, and is in the gutter where it belongs.

The darkest spot in these pages is the direct quotation from the executive of one of our midwest cities as follows: "A municipality should buy the most convenient location with possibilities of expansion, and it's then a good investment."

The bright spot in these various pages was a report from one of the west coast cities. Here they are paying for parking lots by assessment against property owners in a district affected. And the rates are 5¢ an hour. That is a bright spot for the parkers of this community.

Over 25 years ago I was active in designing some ramp garages in Cleveland, and also in helping parking lot operators analyze and bid on property. From such a perspective, and from parallel activity since that time, I should like to make the following comments.

Observations Based on Experience

A prospective parking lot was usually a blighted site, temporarily or otherwise. Obviously, it did not have a sound improvement on it or it would not have been considered for parking, at that time at least. Blighted sites create blighted areas, and much of our parking-lot activity has focused around such areas. That is as true today as it was 25 years ago.

But the very use of the term blighted area shows that we have not thought the matter through. We really have no blighted areas. What we do have are *blighted owners*, the typical downtown property owner, sitting on his holdings, trying to get the maximum return with the minimum investment and risk.

The great impact of mass individual transportation, 40,000,000 automobiles, requiring mass terminals at focal points of traffic, obviously, community centers from one coast to the other, the parking problem under discussion, has been the *out*, the salvation, of the downtown property owner who neither cared, nor was able to help himself.

The parking meter is essentially a robot displacing the lot operator, an ingenious mechanism to collect the pennies, nickels and dimes of the masses to bail out the owners who have done nothing.

What worries me as I go through these pages of the past 16 months is that, at the current trend, we are fastening on our cities, for the next 30 years and more, a system of *parking at high prices*. As I have pointed out in the early thirties, parking is a nuisance industry, a hat-checking concession on a greater scale, but still a nuisance. It diverts effective purchasing power to a disturbing degree. Long before 1980, learning the hard way, we may well come to curse *the social blunders which today are fastening a high cost parking system on us*.