



Campus Connection: UW-Madison phasing out most free handicap parking spaces

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The University of Wisconsin-Madison is in the process of eliminating most free handicapped parking spaces across campus in a move that's being criticized by some with mobility disabilities.

"It's just a shame the university wants to put in another obstacle, in this case a financial one, limiting my ability to have independent access to the campus," says Monica Kamal, the founder of [Madison's Spinal Cord Injury Group](#) and a volunteer on the UW-Madison campus.

There currently are 73 free state Department of Transportation disabled parking stalls in surface lots across the UW-Madison campus. But that number will drop to 16 over the next year as UW Transportation Services transitions most of the free spaces to gated ramps and parking garages -- which means people wanting to use these spots will have to pay, just as an able-bodied individual must foot the bill to park in a university facility.

The university will continue to sell UW disabled permits, which cost \$495 per year and are available to those with a disabled permit from the state DOT. The UW disabled permit allows holders to park in unreserved permit stalls and metered stalls, or in designated university disabled stalls, in any lot or parking structure on campus.

Casey Newman, the associate director of [UW Transportation Services](#), says he can understand the frustrations of some but believes there are good reasons to transfer most of the university's free DOT parking stalls to gated parking facilities.

"The spots in our parking garages tend to be closer to the more popular places on campus people want to get to, plus they fare better in poor weather," says Newman.

As for having people pay for disabled parking spots that once were free, Newman says it's a consistency issue. "We believe if you are coming to campus and want to park here it's appropriate you purchase parking like everyone else does."

But some with mobility disabilities argue there are plenty of options -- from riding the bus to driving a scooter, biking or walking -- for able-bodied people to get to campus without paying high parking fees. For someone like Kamal -- who is paralyzed from the breast bone down but can drive and then independently get around in a motor-assisted wheelchair -- having access to parking close to a particular campus building isn't just a perk that some are willing to pay for.

"Parking for my van (with a wheelchair lift) isn't a luxury, it's a necessity," says Kamal, who volunteers on campus a couple of times each week during the school year, allowing students majoring in fields such as kinesiology and occupational therapy to get experience working with people with disabilities. "The Americans with Disabilities Act guarantees a reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities, and maybe for those making \$100,000, parking fees may not be a big deal. But for most disabled people I know who are living on fixed incomes, these fees can represent a significant barrier to access."

Jayne Memmel, who is wrapping up his master's degree in rehabilitation psychology at UW-Madison, says he doesn't think the university is being malicious in its parking decisions -- it's more an instance of ignorance.

"I just don't think the university cares enough to go the extra mile to fully understand what some individuals in wheelchairs go through when they drive to campus," says Memmel, who is paralyzed from the shoulders down but has enough use of his arms to drive himself to campus in his van, which has a wheelchair lift. Even though he has a UW disabled parking permit, he notes he still usually has to park four blocks away from the Education Building, where he does most of his schoolwork.

"The university may be ADA compliant with its number of spots, but I think some of their parking spaces aren't in very good places that I can easily get to," says Memmel, who uses a power wheelchair to get from his van to class. "It's about having independent access to campus, but I don't always feel like I have that."

Newman says the university recently completed an analysis of the utilization of handicapped parking spaces across campus. Among other things, the study examined where handicapped parking spaces are used the most and least, and identified spots that need to be brought up to Americans



with Disabilities Act standards, including making sure enough spaces are extra wide to accommodate vans with wheelchair lifts.

Currently, Newman says there are a total of 487 disabled parking spots (state DOT slots plus UW disabled) on campus, and in about a year that number will drop to 432 -- or 3.3 percent of the university's approximately 13,000 campus parking spaces. Despite cutting about 50 disabled spots, the university still will be well north of the 2 percent threshold mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act. Newman adds that the university is being very careful to get rid of spaces that its analysis showed get little to no use. In addition, some of the lost spots were because UW-Madison added more extra-wide disabled parking spaces to accommodate those who drive vans with wheelchair lifts.

Transportation services does not receive federal, state or university funding, and instead uses the dollars raised from selling parking permits to fund the overall campus parking operation.

Those with mobility disabilities who are upset with the university say decisions were made without getting enough input from those affected, and note UW-Madison conducted its analysis of handicapped parking on campus without surveying those who use disabled parking spots.

"My personal opinion is they're following the letter of the law in terms of making sure they have enough disabled parking spots, but not the spirit of the law," says Kamal, who over the past several months has written to the chancellor and appeared before a campus transportation committee meeting to voice her frustration, to no avail. "Persons with mobility impairments cannot get around UW as safely and effectively as those without limitations."

Kamal, who does much of her volunteer work at the UW Natatorium, currently parks in a surface lot directly across Observatory Drive from the facility. Today there are three state DOT disabled parking spots in that lot. But when they are removed at some point in the next year, she will either have to purchase a UW disabled permit, or will have to pay to park in a university parking garage a couple blocks away. The yearly disabled permit is \$495, while a day pass is \$12 and a half-day pass is \$7. Some programs also can work out deals with UW Transportation Services, with those helping out the kinesiology program, for example, being sold permits for \$100 per year.

"But would you pay money to volunteer?" poses Kamal. "I'm not sure how many people would."

Adds Kamal: "I actually wouldn't be against buying a permit if I was guaranteed there would be a (UW) disabled spot for me. But experience tells me that wouldn't always be the case. I just want to have equal access to this university."