

**BICYCLE PARKING ON STATE STREET
(and parts of the Capital Square.)
Issues and Solutions**

Written by Robbie Webber

originally in approx. 2005, later revised and expanded summer 2011

The problem – inadequate bicycle parking

It is clear there is a lack of adequate bicycle parking on State Street. One only needs to walk up and down the street to see that there are many more bicycles than there are spots to park them. Even existing racks contain many more bikes than they were designed to accommodate.

Why it matters

If anyone thinks that this is just an inconvenience to bicyclists, I must point out that it is not. With nowhere appropriate to park bicycles, they are locked to benches, sign poles, parking meters, trees, fences, or other objects. They lean against buildings or other vertical surfaces. They then become pedestrian hazards or damage street furniture.

Appropriately accommodating bicycle parking makes business sense – and cents. A few years back we were proposing to build a brand new car parking ramp for \$11 million (the Mid-State St Ramp.) The yet-to-be-designed ramp to replace the Government East Ramp has an unknown, but likely very high price tag. We added 27 auto spots on the Square. We hear constantly about the need for auto parking in downtown. Many, many bikes can be parked in the space needed for just one car, and the cost is pennies compared to even one underground auto spot. Yet we have no plan to accommodate the thousands of visitors to State Street that arrive by bicycle.

Just as with car parking, businesses with convenient bike parking gain customers. Those without spots lose the impulse buyers or convenience diners. One reason people bike to downtown is because they can ride up to their destination. But if there is nowhere to park in front of the building, they may bypass that location for another.

The barriers to more bicycle parking

Whenever I have asked about increased bicycle parking, city staff points out all the locations on the sidewalk where a standard 3-4 space racks **cannot** be placed. There is only a limited amount of sidewalk, and many uses compete for the space. Besides a place to walk, the sidewalk on State Street is a place to serve food and beverages, sell merchandise, or sit on a bench. There are also street trees, delivery zones, bus stops, trash containers, street lights, and other street amenities. These are all fine uses, but each use competes with the others.

In addition to lack of space on the sidewalk, some merchants and property owners do not wish to have a bike rack placed in front of their building. I have heard comments that bike racks are “unsightly.” This is sad, because each bike means a potential customer for that business or an employee that does not need a car parking spot. I am also struggling with the resistance to placing bike racks on the south side of the 200 block (the Overture side.) According to our 1988 zoning code amendment, all new developments need to include bicycle parking in their plans. Yet the Planning Department has indicated none were included in the plans for Overture. This is direct violation of our zoning code. Further, the Overture Board has indicated they do not wish any racks placed on their side of the 200 block of State St. Since this side of the street is considerably wider than the north side, with fewer vendors and cafes, and Overture is far and away the largest draw on that block, I find it strange that they hold this position.

(The above paragraph was written a couple off years after the Overture Center was opened. Since then, as part of the redesign and rebuilding of the 200 block, I managed to get some racks installed on Fairchild St, at least within view of the main entrance to Overture. However, the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art still resists allowing any racks on the corner of State St and Henry, either on the State St side or the Henry side. There is quite a bit of space in both these locations, and a desperate need in that part of State St, especially for large events downtown.)

Finally, I believe a barrier to adequately accommodating bicycle parking needs is the assumption that the only way bicycles can be stored is on the sidewalk in standard 3-4 space racks. True, there are racks in the parking garages, but as we will see, there is no signage to direct people to these locations. I believe there is also an implicit “this is the best we can do” attitude among city staff. There does not appear to be the will among the various departments to solve the problem.

At some point in our civic past, Madison city staff, elected officials, and citizens made the decision that the city had the responsibility to appropriately store cars. We made accommodations so that there were places for people to leave their cars safely and efficiently while they worked, shopped, dined, attended events, or even went home to sleep. Madison has one of the highest bicycle transportation mode splits in the entire US, and the downtown is the highest use in Madison. It is time for the city to make this same commitment to bicycle parking.

Below are some ideas to relieve the bicycle parking crisis in downtown. No one idea will be sufficient, and all are just that, ideas. This is simply a starting point for further brainstorming and discussion. I hope you find it helpful.

Concepts to consider

1. **Begin to think of bicycle parking in the same way we think of car parking.** On June 9, (2005?) DMI hosted a presentation on Best Practices in Parking Management. Although I found most of the information too obvious for a city such as Madison, we can use some of the same concepts the consultant

covered to plan appropriate bicycle parking. Look over your notes, and simply substitute “bicycle” everywhere that you would normally think “cars.” Proximity to destinations, inviting parking facilities, signage, customer service, new technologies, Private-public partnerships, etc. are but a few concepts that we need to consider.

2. **Think of bicycles in the same way we think of cars.** They are vehicles that need to be stored for short or long periods of time. We have short, medium, and long term car parking. We remove cars that appear to be abandoned. We have a limit on how long a car can be parked in a certain location. We devote staff to making sure cars are efficiently parked, and we enforce rules. We have people who use their cars every day, and people who use them occasionally. We have people that do not know their way around downtown, and we help them find a place to park their cars. People use their cars for commuting, for work, for shopping trips, or simply to visit the downtown. All of the above could also be said for bicycles. In some cases, using the same rules and requirements may not make sense, but we can start to think of bikes as vehicles that need a framework for parking.

Possible solutions

1. **Make sure that bikes that are abandoned are removed.** Bikes abandoned in racks are occupying spaces that others could be using. The city has let this task lapse, but it was never adequately staffed. Bicycles could be tagged on Monday each week and removed on Friday if the tag still exists. This means no bike is removed before 3 days has elapsed, and would clear spots a minimum of once a week. It seems that bikes only get removed before Maxwell Street Days and before Halloween. Even when people call to request removal of an abandoned bike, it is not done. We already have an ordinance that bicycles cannot be parked on the public right of way for more than 48 hours. It is the same ordinance that requires cars be moved every 48 hours (a requirement that many of my neighbors hate because they do not use their cars frequently.)
2. **Consider lockers for daily commuters or local residents without bike storage on site.** Many spots that could be occupied by shoppers or diners are taken by long term parkers. Lockers could be rented monthly. This allows a bicyclist with extensive commuting gear (lights, panniers, odometer, helmet, etc.) to leave much of the gear on the bike and know that it will be secure. People riding more expensive bikes will also feel their bike is safe from theft or vandalism.
3. **Consider coin-operated lockers for people who wish to leave expensive bikes or purchases in the locker for medium or long term parking.** An example would be similar to lockers one sees in train terminals or airports. Occasional shoppers may not want to rent a monthly locker, but they will be glad to have a place to store purchases while they eat dinner or attend events. It would allow use similar to taking one's purchases back to the car until one is ready to go home.

4. **Signage is very important.** Many racks exist in locations that are not obvious or even visible from the main destinations on State St. This is one of the problems with the racks in the parking ramps or farther away from State St on Henry Street. If one is going to a show at the Orpheum or Overture Center, how is one supposed to know that racks exist on Henry St or the State Street Capital ramp? Even staring directly at the entrance to the city ramp gives no indication that racks are available inside.
5. **Put smaller racks on the street.** Parking meters or sign poles are used as de facto bike racks, yet take up little space. “Hitching post” type racks can accommodate two bikes, and occupy very little space. There are many locations that cannot accommodate a 3-4 space rack, but could easily take a hitching post.
6. **Convert parking meters, poles, or other street accessories into real racks.** This has been started with the conversion of the parking meters to “pay by space” parking systems. The poles remain and have been retrofitted with rings to allow proper bicycle parking. Tree protection fences, benches, or other street furniture can include bike parking spaces. This is done in many cities where people have used trees as bicycle parking. (This is illegal in Madison and damages young trees, which is why it is illegal in most cities.) decorative fences around trees can also have elements to allow proper bicycle parking.
7. **The city may need to acquire property to adequately accommodate bicycle parking.** We use real estate that could be privately held to park cars. Is it time to build a city bike parking lot or ramp? One caveat with this concept is that bicycle parking needs to be even more convenient than car parking in order to be used. One reason that bicycles are an attractive transportation alternative is because there is an expectation that parking will be extremely close to the destination. The previously proposed “Bike Station” at or near the site of the Government East Ramp/Public Market/High Speed Rail Station/current municipal lot would serve employees in the GEF complexes and the south side of the Square, but would not serve most of State St. However, a similar facility might help relieve the need for secure long-term parking in the State St area.
8. **More space in city ramps can be devoted to bicycle parking.** However, there must be adequate signage so that bicyclists know the spots exist. Bicycle parking inside ramps should also be attractive and feel safe. Better lighting, better visibility from the street or locations near parking personnel will mean nighttime use is less intimidating. The bicyclist should also feel safe from car traffic within the ramp.
9. **Bicycle racks could be placed on the street instead of the sidewalk.** A wall or other barrier would be required to protect bicycles and users from motorized traffic in the street. On-street parking is the solution for many short-term car parking spots, and it may be one solution for short term bicycle parking as well. One advantage of this approach is that the spots are highly visible and possibly

closer to destinations than other locations. Many bicycles can be parked in the space required for one car, so many spots could be added with minimal loss of car spaces. Cities around the US are starting to convert car spots to bike spots. If plowing in the winter is a problem (as I have heard), these spots could be seasonal, as bicycle parking demand obviously goes down (but not away!) in the winter.

10. **A private-public partnership or a for-profit enterprise may be viable avenues for development of facilities.** Especially with regard to long-term bicycle parking, it is possible to make bike parking profitable. A business with underutilized space may wish to offer guarded bicycle parking for daily commuters. This would not even require racks, but simply a secure place to leave one's bike. State Street is not the ideal location for this because of a lack of large employers. This concept would work very well near the GEF buildings. (See comments above about proposed Bike Station.)
11. **Large event sponsors or destinations may want to consider "valet" bicycle parking.** In the past, Bicycle Federation of Wisconsin provided this service for the Great Taste of the Midwest and the Madison Blues Festival, both in Olin Park. A non-profit group or even a for-profit enterprise could park bikes for events such as Maxwell Street Days, Taste of Madison, Farmers' Market, Overture Center events, Orpheum concerts, etc. The sponsor or group would need to find a location to store the bikes while patrons attend the event, but the location would not need to be as close as optimal racks.
12. **Consider vertical storage.** Lockers exist which allow bicycles to be parked on two levels. I have tested some of the devices at conferences, and even a short woman with little upper body strength (me) can place a bicycle in the upper berth. Some racks are made that hang bikes by the front wheel. This allows bicycle parking in less horizontal space than a standard rack.

Next steps

The above ideas are just off the top of my head. I am not an urban designer, planner, parking expert, or engineer. I have also not studied the problem except as a user of the facilities (or lack thereof.) As with any change in city policy, investment, or public need, I would suggest we do a study of the issues and problems and come up with a set of formal recommendations. Below are some steps that should be included to reach a solutions to the problem of inadequate bicycle parking downtown.

Several different city departments will need to be consulted, but I would suggest that the lead department should be Planning. They work with the downtown business community, neighborhood groups, economic development interests, City Engineering, Mall Concourse (housed in the Parks Dept), and Traffic Engineering (Parking Utility and the Bicycle-Pedestrian Coordinator) on a regular basis. Planning has the staff and expertise to work with all these interests.

Survey existing bicycle parking facilities. Traffic Engineering and Mall Concourse should have a list and count of all the bike racks in the State St/Capital Square area, but I wonder if they also include the racks in the parking ramps. If these counts and location maps need to be updated, that should be done.

Survey where bikes are parked, both legally and illegally. I have done occasional counts on State St, and often found 140% more bikes parked than there are legal and appropriate parking spots. We need to know what the demand is in order to meet said demand. Surveys should be done during the day midweek, during Farmers Market, when there is an evening event (for instance Overture), and on weekends, both daytime and evening. Art Fair on the Square, Concerts on the Square, Maxwell St Days, or other special events should be included in these surveys.

Talk to business owners. Some may have ideas, others concerns. I have heard from some business interests that they are very concerned about the lack of adequate parking for their customers. Others may not realize that their customers come by bike. Still others are actively opposed to additional bike parking in front of their business.

Talk to the Madison Police Department and Mall Concourse about how to solve the abandoned bike problem. Tagging and removing abandoned bikes does not seem to be a priority, or even a regular event, however I believe it is crucial to solving this problem.

Survey bicyclists parking downtown. These are the customers for the facilities. There are likely many categories and corresponding needs with the bicycling community: business customers, daytime commuters, event attendees, downtown residents (who probably have nowhere else to park, so use racks that should be available for short term parkers), downtown employees, etc.

Consider the needs of different users. Some of these bicyclists may be willing to park slightly farther away, in less convenient spots, if given better, more secure facilities. For instance, if someone will be parking for several hours every day (commuters), they may give up a spot in front of their place of business if their options are expanded to locked, covered, or otherwise upgraded facilities. Downtown residents may need a place to store their bikes overnight or for winter. Again, we may be able to make more street spots available if we move long term parking elsewhere. Also, some consideration of paid bicycle parking may be appropriate for optimum spots and facilities. (See suggestions of lockers, "bike stations," and public-private partnerships.)

Survey space that could be converted to bicycle parking. Bicycle parking can be clumped together - like a parking ramp, or dispersed - like street spots for cars, but using post and ring or 2-bike spots.

Come up with a plan to meet the demand! Again, this might involve a list of recommendations, such as long term solutions, such as structured bicycle parking, as well as short term or policy changes using existing facilities.