In adding garage after garage, we’re just going about transportation planning all wrong.

To preserve the character of Center City, this town needs less parking, not more

Vukan R. Vuchic

Proposals to construct new garages in Center City always cause outcry. Meeting after meeting is dominated by the question. Pro-garage people argue the city needs more parking; More people will come downtown and spend more money. Anti-garage people argue that parking garages increase traffic congestion on adjacent streets, lead to the destruction of historic buildings, and contribute to the deterioration of neighborhoods — for example, the Rittenhouse Square area.

But the strongest and most permanent impact on the city and its residents is seldom included in the debate. That is the question of what parking lots and garages do to the city in the long run. Construction of additional garages influences the choice of modes for travel into and within the city, the quality of life in the city, and ultimately the desire of people to live in or visit Center City. These issues are still largely misunderstood in Philadelphia.

Here’s the basic problem we face today: Most people are used to the convenience of the automobile for their daily trips. They expect highways and garages to extend this convenience right into the city center. But the car hurts cities. Extensive driving causes congestion, which greatly reduces not only the efficiency of driving, but also the use of surface transit, in turn hurting the city and its economic vitality, living conditions, and the quality of life for visitors.

Cities that have built extensive freeway networks and blocks of parking garages have worse traffic congestion than cities with only moderate freeway networks but systematically improved transit services that offer a convenient alternative to driving. Thus, construction of more parking facilities does not alleviate, but actually aggravates congestion.

Furthermore, cities that simply tried to satisfy the demand for parking have destroyed their human character and made downtowns and suburban towns unattractive for people. For example, Detroit is making great efforts to revitalize its downtown, but that is difficult to achieve in an area crisscrossed by freeways and filled with multistory parking garages.

It is a physical fact that car commuters take 30 percent more space to park their cars than they occupy in their offices. So if everyone working in an eight-story office building come by car, a 10-story parking garage will be needed.

Most attractive, livable cities, such as San Francisco, Boston, and Munich, have one common feature: very limited, expensive parking. It is actually a nuisance to drive a car in these cities. But they do have convenient and ubiquitous transit, and very lively streets. These examples show that making parking limited and expensive is an effective way to maintaining a desirable balance between the use of cars and transit.

Effective policy should include lower rates for short-term parkers, removing them from Center City streets. But all-day parking rates should be very high to discourage, rather than stimulate, car commuting. This policy has not been implemented here, and parking rates continue to favor all-day parking.

Large parking garages in the core of the city not only aggravate congestion, but also render entire blocks pedestrian-unfriendly and devalue their surroundings. This is true regardless of how “aesthetically sensitized” the garages are made. Suggestion: Most parking facilities should be built around downtowns, not in their core. Certainly, conversion of office space into parking garages at locations with excellent transit accessibility, such as at 17th and Market Streets, directly above SEPTA stations, is contrary to any rational transportation policy.

Tourists come to find lively streets, restaurants, stores and museums that make Philadelphia attractive. But fewer of them will come if additional garages are approved one by one and gradually make the city less attractive.

The main reason for the lack of direction in the parking-garage debate is that our city and region lack effective implementation of rational, coordinated transportation policies and plans. What we’re all after is a human-oriented, economically vibrant, and environmentally sensitive regional core. Good policy needs to consider all modes of travel (not just the car), consistently upgrade transit services, and strike a balance between car and transit use.

In the present confusion, it makes little sense to put a moratorium on all parking decisions. Parking policies, developed years ago, should be revived and updated, and new solutions to the city’s mobility needs — including a variety of forms of transportation — should be defined. And find good ways to make sure these policies are carried out.

Philadelphia must face an important question: Do we want to satisfy the immediate desire for convenient driving and parking, or achieve an inviting historical and livable city? Center City should not attempt to compete with the plentiful parking of suburban malls, because in such attempts it would lose its character — its singular advantage the malls can never match. Center City must keep its human orientation, the local attraction for residents and visitors.

Vukan R. Vuchic (vu@seas.upenn.edu) is a professor of transportation systems engineering at the University of Pennsylvania.