

Section II: Common Themes, Challenges and Opportunities

Section I presented a comprehensive quantitative picture of how parking currently functions in Downtown Kirkland. Data from that analysis was also used to forecast potential growth in parking demand and the impact that growth would have on the availability of parking. Equally important for development of a parking management plan is an understanding of the vision for the future of the downtown from the perspective of the stakeholders. Section II provides a “qualitative” assessment of the downtown.

1. BACKGROUND

The PWG met in several work sessions to discuss and identify common themes and develop consensus on the following issues:

- Development and access challenges for businesses and residents.
- Current opportunities that would facilitate doing business in the downtown.
- Identification of priority users of the downtown (current and future).
- Definition of an “ideal” downtown.

The PWG’s work in addressing the above stated issues provided a foundation for understanding downtown not only from the perspective of parking, but of long-term visioning for economic development. This effort resulted in establishment of a consensus set of Guiding Principles to guide parking management decisions in a strategic manner. These Guiding Principles are presented in Section III.

2. KIRKLAND DOWNTOWN STRATEGIC PLAN (DSP)

The downtown parking strategy developed through this study will remain sensitive to and compatible with the extensive planning work already completed in the *Kirkland Downtown Strategic Plan*.²⁵ The Downtown Strategic Plan (DSP) is a comprehensive vision that sets forth the primary recommendations of the Downtown Action Team (DAT) about the downtown and desired changes for Kirkland's central area. Parking is a key element presented in the plan. DSP considerations and recommendations for parking include:

- Successful retail requires an adequate supply of parking that is convenient and affordable.
- On-street parking and nearby structured parking with good access are critical for retail success.
- Centralized, shared parking facilities will be more effective and efficient than requiring each facility to provide its own off-street parking.
- The City should play a leadership role in providing parking in the downtown that is consistent with these principles.
 - Build a covered parking structure capped with a significant public plaza over the current surface parking lot adjacent to the waterfront.

²⁵ The City adopted the *Kirkland Downtown Strategic Plan* on June 5, 2001.

We believe the Guiding Principles and parking management tools developed and recommended in the parking strategy (Sections IV and VIII) assure that the DSP goals and objectives for parking are supported.

3. STAKEHOLDER INPUT

The participation of downtown stakeholders in this process has been strong and represents a critical component of this work. Stakeholders will continue to represent an essential resource for the City as the parking management plan and strategies recommended in this study are implemented over time. As such, understanding stakeholder concerns and ideas for downtown is critically important because they are the users of the downtown system on a daily basis. In addition, their investment and ownership in downtown will be supported as the recommendations of the parking study and management strategy are put in place. Any parking or access changes made to the downtown will have a direct impact on those who own, work, shop, or visit Downtown Kirkland. The consultant team believes the plan has striven to be sensitive to, and cognizant of, this relationship.

4. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

PWG members were asked to list and discuss the major challenges facing downtown today and in the coming years. Overall, thirty items were derived from the PWG discussion. Challenges ranged from general perceptions to actual physical infrastructure.

Once listed, the PWG was then asked to prioritize the list by voting for those challenges that would have the greatest impact on improving downtown if they were immediately addressed (i.e. over a three to seven year period). It was stressed and agreed, however, that all the challenges on the list were important and would eventually need to be addressed in an overall revitalization effort for downtown

A. Challenges to Economic Development – Consensus Priorities

Four challenges were clearly distinguished from the broader list. They are briefly detailed here (in rank order):

- Need for a consensus plan to prepare for future economic viability and growth.* Stakeholders agreed there is not a consensus among private and public leaders as to how the downtown should grow and develop. Several stakeholders mentioned, “Kirkland needs to find its niche,” then market, communicate and plan toward that effort. Additional community discussions on downtown’s economic development vision need to take place.

- There is a lack of available commercial and physical space necessary to accommodate growth.* There is strong consensus among stakeholders that Kirkland’s downtown is physically constrained for growth. As one stakeholder noted, “There is a horizontal, as well as a vertical, cap on usable/leasable space.” Efforts to develop/redevelop vacant and underutilized properties and an evaluation of City floor area requirements will be critical to address this priority challenge.

- ❑ *Need to expand waterfront opportunities.* There is strong agreement that Kirkland is not exploiting the waterfront as an economic development attractor or as a point of access for bringing people to and from Kirkland. Stakeholders recommended that greater efforts be made to pursue ferry and water access opportunities. This would serve to increase overall access capacity for the downtown and address road congestion issues that currently affect Kirkland's central core. Additionally, efforts need to be made that incorporate recreational users of the waterfront into retail and commercial activities in the downtown.
- ❑ *Public expectation of free and proximate parking.* There is strong consensus among stakeholders that the overall economic viability of the downtown will require that an adequate supply of parking be maintained to serve customer and employee demand. There is an equal consensus, and concern, that the public's expectation that parking in Kirkland remains free of charge and proximate to specific uses, will limit the City's ability to fund increases in the supply of parking.

Other challenges ranked by the PWG included (in rank order):

- Affordable lease space for existing and new businesses.
- Need for better connectivity in the downtown between destinations (i.e., core, park, and waterfront).
- Required parking ratios.
- Lack of a commercial anchor(s) – something that would act as a destination for people (i.e., Pottery Barn)- something that would act as an attractor in and of itself.
- Maximizing physical assets (park, lake).
- Linking physical assets to commercial opportunity.
- Competition from Bellevue/Redmond - other commercial centers/suburban malls.
- General regional transportation issues (people do not feel they can get to Kirkland reliably/in a reasonable amount of time).
- Lack of a marketing strategy.
- Pedestrian safety.
- Taking advantage of through traffic - converting commuters to shoppers.

Unranked challenges to attracting new business or growing existing business included:

- Perception that business growth is flat. No mechanism to determine actual market trends locally to determine *actual* business performance in Kirkland. This information would be an essential marketing tool for attracting business to Kirkland.
- Leakage (local residents do not buy in Kirkland).
- Disconnect between the downtown and Park Place.
- Perception that Kirkland has no capacity to grow. Capacity can be defined as physical space, road or parking capacity.
- Narrowly focused positioning of business. The mix of businesses is not diverse.
- Lack of village concept/attractor point.
- Balancing the reality of growth with a local culture that would likely desire limited growth.
- Poorly positioned to take advantage of first-class physical assets (lake, Peter Kirk Park). How do you turn Peter Kirk Park into a connector rather than a barrier?

- Physical beauty/park system clogs downtown with people who are not shopping/spending money downtown (not linking physical assets to commercial opportunities).
- I-405 dependent.
- Perception of access/capacity.
- Proximity of parking to land use(s).
- Geological challenges (water table) and the affect it might have on development of underground parking.

B. Challenges to Access

Following the discussion on challenges to economic opportunity, the PWG was asked to identify any challenges from the entire list that were specifically related to parking or transportation. Six specific access challenges were highlighted that should be addressed with the development of an overall downtown parking strategy.

- Parking supply is not managed to maximum potential.* There was a feeling by some on the PWG the existing parking supply is not managed or structured to achieve optimum utilization. The downtown-parking inventory conducted by the consultant team (and presented in Section I) has helped inform understanding of this stated concern.
- Parking abuse.* PWG members believe that there is a high level of abuse by employees of the on-street parking system. Employees are seen as not parking in areas designated for employee parking, violating time stays and “moving to evade.” This type of activity does not allow maximum efficiency and availability of on-street parking for customer and visitor parking access in the downtown.
- Traffic and circulation (congestion and ingress/egress).* The PWG expressed concern that it is difficult for patrons coming from outlying areas to access downtown. Dense commuter traffic conditions characterize access portals into the downtown. Compounding this is the sense that directional and information systems for patrons are inadequate, both on the external traffic system and within the downtown itself.
- Perception of access/capacity.* Several PWG members noted that perceptions of Kirkland having limited parking, and being difficult to access in general, are having adverse impacts on business. The need for aggressive and sustained marketing and communications will be important.
- Poor off-peak transit service for downtown employees.* The PWG noted transit service could play an important role in addressing congestion issues and influencing the overall amount of parking that maybe required in the future. However, improvements in service and frequency will need to be made if meaningful mode shifts by employees are to be realized.
- Cost of building parking.* Several on the PWG expressed concern regarding the community’s ability (public and private sector) to provide for increases in the parking supply necessary to meet growing demand. The cost to develop parking, particularly in structures, is very high and the current system (free parking) does not support growth in the supply of parking.

C. Opportunities – Consensus Themes

PWG members were asked to list and discuss programs, strategies or elements of downtown that “are working for downtown,” by contributing to its success and supporting business and economic growth. Overall, twenty items were listed. Opportunities ranged from Kirkland’s unique business environment to its strong sense of community. Five opportunities were clearly distinguished from the remainder of the list. They are briefly detailed here (in rank order):

- ❑ *Increased residential development - potential to grow market.* Kirkland has a strong and growing residential base. Dense residential clusters lie immediately adjacent to the commercial center of downtown and represent a significant market for downtown’s retail and service sector. The PWG sees continued opportunity in pursuing efforts that not only grow residential densities in and near downtown, but also create a mix of businesses that tap into the economic potential that residents bring to downtown business.
- ❑ *Free public parking.* The PWG sees Kirkland’s current parking program (with free customer and employee parking) as an important element in Kirkland’s attractiveness as a place to shop, recreate and work. Interestingly, this “opportunity” was also listed as a priority challenge by the PWG. The ability to continue and/or balance the attractiveness and marketability of free public parking (opportunity) with the need to create new parking supply in the future (challenge) will be a central piece of the parking strategy.
- ❑ *Demonstrable commitment to downtown by the City, business community and citizenry.* PWG members underscored the active role the business community and citizens have played in Kirkland’s success and the partnership approach of City leadership. Stakeholders noted that there is a strong “sense of community and family” in Kirkland, which underlies Kirkland’s unique character and success. The efforts of the Kirkland Downtown on the Lake’s (KDL) Parking Task Force to improve parking operations and enforcement were applauded. The KDL was also identified as an important partner in the overall success of downtown.
- ❑ *City’s willingness to test innovative programs.* The PWG agreed that the City of Kirkland has been a willing and creative partner in implementing programs to improve and maximize access to the downtown. Programs like Park Smart, Flexcar and valet parking options were given as examples of City sponsored programs that work and contribute to the overall accessibility of downtown.
- ❑ *Waterfront/physical beauty/boat moorage.* PWG members strongly recognized the unique amenities and elements of the downtown waterfront that make Downtown Kirkland a special place. The waterfront as a destination and attractor in and of itself is seen as an untapped opportunity area. As with the issue of free parking, the waterfront was also ranked as an important priority challenge for the downtown. Several PWG members noted that the primary challenges identified above could be addressed through programs that continue to support, enhance, communicate and link the waterfront to downtown amenities for customers, visitors and residents.

Other opportunities ranked by the PWG included (in rank order):

- Outstanding demographics for business.

- Good business association network.
- Good foot traffic/pedestrian volumes - 4 months per year.
- Great business environment downtown.
- Downtown is a unique destination and shopping experience.
- Attractive streetscape.
- Sense of place/home/community/friendly people.

Unranked opportunities included:

- Safe community/streets.
- Proximity to larger region.
- Diversity (business & people).
- Parks.
- Parking waiver for restaurants.
- Parking enforcement for time limited parking.
- Free employee parking.
- Public art.
- Proximity of downtown to the lake.
- Transit center in downtown.
- Traffic volume through downtown.
- No one-way streets.

Overall, programs and strategies that continue to support and enhance the opportunity themes developed by the PWG can serve as a framework through which the consensus challenges are best addressed.

5. BECOMING AN “IDEAL DOWNTOWN”

As a precursor to developing Guiding Principles, the PWG was led through a discussion on the elements or building blocks that make up “ideal” downtowns. The PWG was asked to list elements that make up their perception of a perfect or ideal downtown. PWG members were also asked to mention cities they had been to that contained elements that uniquely distinguished the downtown area.

Cities mentioned, with their most distinguishing characteristic(s), included:

- Paris, France (architectural integrity)
- Stockholm, Sweden (Old-Town historic density with high buildings)
- Chicago, Illinois (diversity and architecture)
- Bern, Switzerland (cleanliness and architecture)
- Cambridge, England (good street activity)
- Bruges, Belgium (no cars downtown, great architecture)
- Verona, Italy (history, self contained, public transportation)
- Sausalito, California (water, views, access)
- St. Helena, California (it knows what it is – has an identity)

- Ketchum, Idaho (tourism, destination as well as good place to live)
- Tiberon, Italy (self contained)
- Whistler, British Columbia (pedestrian oriented, focused)
- Mill Valley, California (cohesive sense of community)
- New Orleans, Louisiana (culture, 24 hour downtown)
- Boston, Massachusetts (central commons)

The PWG developed an extensive list of those elements they believed make up an ideal downtown. This list could serve as a verbal picture of what it takes to become “ideal.” The PWG then made note of those elements on the list that Kirkland currently maintains, as denoted by an “X” below. Elements that are partially maintained are denoted by “1/2”. Empty boxes indicate that Kirkland either lacks this element or needs significant improvement in that area.

Table 15 summarizes the results of the PWG discussion.

**Table 15
Elements of an Ideal Downtown**

Ideal Elements	Kirkland	Ideal Elements	Kirkland
Wide sidewalks		Public gathering places ringed by residential	X
Pedestrian scale	X	Ease of access to and from downtown	
Quality of built environment	½	Natural water features	X
Effective public transportation	½	Compact area/quality retail	
Affordable		People watching places	X
Protection from natural elements		Safety (both real and perceived)	X
Historic defining area		Cultural center	
Public art	X	Self contained (24-hour city)	
Mature trees/landscaping	½	Attractive to all ages	½
Well maintained buildings	X	Restaurants	X
Cohesive sense of community	X	Diverse shopping opportunities	½
Clean	½	Unique architecture	½

There was a clear recognition expressed by the PWG that Kirkland currently maintains a strong mix of elements that would distinguish it as an ideal downtown. Of 24 elements listed, Kirkland offers, and is strong, in nine. Another seven are in place but need emphasis. Additional planning and development of elements such as wide sidewalks, improved access (ingress/egress), cultural venues (i.e. museums) and “quality” retail need to be addressed in future strategic and development planning.

6. ACCESS PRIORITIES

A. Key Elements of a Successful Parking Program

PWG members were asked to list those elements of a parking program that, if in place in Kirkland, would both facilitate solving the transportation challenges and support/enhance the priority opportunities described above. Phrases used by the PWG included:

- Simple, intuitive, habituating.
- Convenient access to the stall.
- Well signed and understood.
- Pays for itself – revenue neutral.
- Safe and secure.
- Effective enforcement.
- Real-time information.
- Protection from the elements (between parking and businesses).
- A management plan that deals with seasonal peaks and special events (public/private cooperation).
- Parking integrated into the existing traffic system.
- Prevents employee and park and ride parking spill over into residential neighborhoods.
- Uniform parking management plan (public/private).
- Accommodates all types of parking (bicycles, motorcycles and boats on the water).
- Accommodates tour buses.
- Connector between Park Place and the core.

The consultant team believes the parking management plan and strategies developed in this plan (Sections IV and VIII) support these elements to the highest degree possible.

B. “Is” Versus “Should”

In a final work session exercise, the PWG discussed its access priorities for downtown. Stakeholders were asked to consider a number of questions regarding the realities of access and use of the transportation system, as it *is* today. They were then asked to consider how the transportation system *should* be accessed and used within the context of the challenges/opportunities discussed above, and incorporates their goals and objectives for developing an “ideal” Downtown Kirkland.

1. Priority “customer” of the downtown

When asked, “*who IS the priority customer of the downtown today?*” the consensus response was:

- Retail shopper
- Restaurant patron
- Tourist
- Service customer
- Recreational user

When asked, “*who SHOULD BE the priority customer in downtown in the future?*” the consensus response was the same list as above, with more local residents shopping and dining in the downtown.

Overall, the PWG was clear in its view that the priority customers in Downtown Kirkland are its **patrons**, those who come repeatedly to shop, dine, recreate and be entertained (i.e., those who spend money). The general time stay profile of the patron is short-term stays that result in high turnover of parking in the downtown.

2. Priority Land Uses

When asked, “*what are the priority land uses in downtown today?*” the work group responded:

- Surface parking
- Residential development
- Small retail
- Commercial (office) services
- Recreational areas

In the future, the work group agreed that the future land uses *SHOULD* include a “better and stronger mix” of residential and retail businesses, with particular emphasis on larger anchor retail. In addition, an increase in support retail, more closely associated with residential needs, is desired. Commercial office is envisioned to remain “status quo,” thereby stabilizing/minimizing the amount of new parking needed for employees versus patrons.

3. Priority Use of Parking

When asked, “*who IS the on-street parking system currently prioritized for?*” the PWG felt that the existing on-street supply strongly favors parking for the customer/patron. In the future, the work group felt downtown, on-street parking *SHOULD* continue to be prioritized for *patrons*. Strong efforts should be made to assure that only patrons are using the on-street system (i.e., enforcement) and that the outer areas and strategically located off-street facilities should serve employees and patrons.

For the same question for publicly owned off-street parking, the committee felt that current management *IS* prioritizing access for patrons. In the future, the PWG believes that publicly owned off-street parking in the downtown *SHOULD* be prioritized for *patrons and recreational users*. Overall, access for employees in publicly owned facilities needs to be managed to continually assure priority access for short-term, high-turnover stays.

As to the question of parking in privately owned off-street parking facilities, the PWG noted the priority for lots in downtown *IS* a mix of users, which includes employees and patrons. The PWG also noted that residential development is providing (prioritizing) parking for residents. Recognizing the City has limited abilities to influence how private facilities are operated, the PWG believes that privately owned, off-street facilities *SHOULD* increasingly prioritize downtown parking for a diverse mix of users.

4. Priorities for Alternative Modes of Access

The PWG considered the role of alternative modes for users of the downtown (patrons and employees). When asked what the on-going role of transit/bike/rideshare and walking was for customers and employees, the PWG stated the following:

- Transit, bicycling, ridesharing *SHOULD* become an *option* that customers can choose as a means to access downtown.
- Transit, bicycling and ridesharing *SHOULD* become a *realistic and cost effective option* that greater numbers of employees *will choose* as a means to access downtown. Alternative modes for employees *SHOULD* be encouraged through incentives.

5. The Role of the Public Sector in Providing Parking

The PWG was asked to consider the role the public sector (i.e., City) *SHOULD* play in working with the community to provide parking to meet the access priorities developed through this process.

The PWG clearly saw the City's role as one of partnership and leadership. Primary responses to the question of the role of the public sector in parking included:

- Use parking as a tool for economic development. The City could build and/or offer parking as an enticement to attract specific, priority developments to locate in Kirkland.
- The City should assure that public parking supply is consistent with the demand associated with public amenities. The City has responsibility for access demand associated with the park, the waterfront and other public amenities in the downtown. At minimum, the City should assure that it provides a parking resource to support these venues.
- Public parking should be consistent with the Downtown Strategic Plan priorities and provided at a level that encourages and supports the ability of people to access and use the downtown. The DSP calls for increased retail development and visitor/shopper oriented growth. The City should have a role in providing parking to support attainment of the plan's objectives. The City has a role and responsibility to provide parking for users of the downtown. The PWG indicated that the City's priority should be parking that serves patrons.
- The City can use its development code and regulatory powers to create incentives to the private sector to provide parking. One example given would offer height bonuses to developments where public/retail parking is provided in a development. The PWG indicated that other "regulatory" incentives could and should be explored.

7. **SUMMARY – Common Themes, Challenges and Opportunities**

A new vision for downtown is developing. That vision recognizes the goal and objective of the City of Kirkland and downtown stakeholders to move downtown toward becoming a vibrant, vital, 24-hour urban neighborhood destination - an ideal downtown. With this recognition has come the understanding that managing the infrastructure that supports multiple economic uses is

challenging. It requires fully using the parking and transportation system to provide understandable, convenient, safe and reliable transportation options for employees, customers, visitors, and residents. This network of access is essential to the vitality of each desired economic use.

It is clear from work with the PWG that there is a strong consensus on the challenges and opportunities that exist in Downtown Kirkland. There is also a clear sense that Kirkland contains many of the elements of economic activity and amenities that comprise “ideal” downtowns. Most importantly, the PWG was strong in its understanding of access priorities and unified in support of developing programs and strategies necessary to make certain those access priorities are met and desired economic uses are supported. In the area of parking, it is clear the priority of stakeholders is to assure continued and growing accessibility for the patron of downtown.