



## MEMORANDUM

To: SoCo Project Management Team  
From: Nelson\Nygaard  
Date: May 22, 2019  
Subject: SoCo Parking Study – Summary of Stakeholder Interviews

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### OVERVIEW

This memorandum provide a summary of the Nelson\Nygaard team site visit and stakeholder interviews on April 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019 for the South Congress (SoCo) Parking Study. Included below is a distillation of the group discussions, with a summary of key themes and comments. This information is intended for team reference and for framing the future direction of the project, including the identification of issues and opportunities for improvement.

### STAKEHOLDER DISCUSSIONS

Stakeholder discussions were held on Wednesday, April 24<sup>th</sup>. Discussion groups included local residents, business owners, property developers, neighborhood organization members, and representatives from regional and state agencies (Figure 1).

The primary goals of the meetings were to (1) gather input from stakeholders about neighborhood parking needs, and (2) provide an open forum for discussion about perceived challenges and opportunities for improvement. Discussions touched on a variety of subjects, many of which recurred throughout the day across multiple groups. Key themes are summarized below.

**Figure 1 Stakeholder Discussion Groups**

Group	Number of Participants
South Congress Merchants Association	7
South Congress Public Improvement District	7
Bouldin Creek Neighborhood Association	6
South Central Waterfront Initiative Project Planners	2
South Congress Developers and Property Owners	11
State and Regional Stakeholders	2
South River City Neighborhood	1

**Users of local businesses, especially employees, struggle to find available parking.**

- The challenge of finding parking for employees, especially longer-term, off-street parking, is making hiring and retention difficult, which in turn can impact business growth.
- Employee safety is a concern. Walking 4-5 blocks from one's place of employment to a car after a late shift, potentially with a large amount of cash on-hand, presents risks for employees.
- Employees in lower-wage jobs are unlikely to be able to afford paid parking.
- Some business owners try to discourage employees from parking directly on South Congress, but often it is their only option. Consistent parkers in the area know there is little to zero parking enforcement on South Congress.
- Off-street parking facilities are often underutilized, but their use is typically restricted. There are barriers to sharing of off-street parking.
- Many visitors simply do not know where publicly available parking is located, as signage and wayfinding is limited or ineffective.

**Most merchants, businesses, and non-residents believe the Residential Parking Permit (RPP) is inefficient. Residents highly value the RPP program to minimize parking spillover, but some recognize opportunity for improvement.**

- Most businesses and commercial property owners believe the current application of the RPP program is inefficient. A consistent theme was that many blocks sit empty during the day, but employees or visitors are not allowed to park there, resulting in an underutilized parking asset. Many also believe the RPP has primarily shifted, rather than alleviated, parking challenges due to its ad hoc block-by-block implementation.
- The RPP system is seen by some business owners as an unfair privatization of what should be a shared public amenity.
- Many business owners believe the current RPP system could be improved by allowing employees to obtain permits, or by allowing time-limited parking for visitors in RPP zones during residential off-peak hours.
- Residents believe very strongly in the need for an RPP system to minimize spillover into their neighborhood and to avoid the nuisances associated with non-resident parking behavior, including blocked driveways and litter. The RPP program is the only parking management tool available to residents.
- The RPP has been implemented in a piecemeal way throughout the neighborhood with inconsistent rules—one block has a 24-hour restriction, while the immediately adjacent block's RPP is only for certain times of day. It is very confusing for visitors.
- Some residents acknowledge the impact of the RPP on employees and businesses, as well as its confusing nature.
- Another key concern is the use of RPP by short-term rentals, and the question of whether or not short-term rental guests should get (free) access to on-street parking.
- Better on-street parking management, such as painted L-shaped roadway parking space markers and improved signage/wayfinding, could help to address some of the neighborhood issues.

**Holistic parking and mobility solutions—rather than piecemeal strategies—are needed.**

- To date, parking management has been ad hoc. RPPs have been rolled out on a block-by-block basis without district-wide coordination. Pricing and meters have primarily been presented independently, rather than as part of a comprehensive approach.
- A previous effort to create a SoCo Parking Benefit District (PBD), which included a plan for parking meters and a fund-sharing program for neighborhood transportation initiatives, was unsuccessful. During this planning process, there was significant opposition to parking meters.
- Central Texas residents are particularly parking cost-averse due to the prevalence of free parking throughout the region.
- Without a comprehensive parking framework, parts of the parking supply can go unused, including empty blocks covered by RPP permits and off-street supply that is hard to find or unavailable for shared parking arrangements.
- Some business owners subsidize bulk transit passes, but those types of employee benefits are largely on a business-by-business basis and not coordinated.
- There is no formal body that helps facilitate mobility options for businesses and their employees within the corridor. To date, Movability has not focused its work as a TMA in the South Congress district.
- Many employees live far away, and cannot get to South Congress on transit without one or more bus transfers.
- Transit service does not run late enough into the night to accommodate late night employee shifts.
- Many employees have multiple jobs or family needs that impact mobility options, travel choices, and vehicle availability.

**The current design of South Congress Avenue is a challenge to ongoing economic vitality, safety, and access.**

- The current biking and pedestrian facilities make multimodal travel difficult or unappealing for both visitors and employees. Challenges include unprotected bike lanes, narrow sidewalks, difficult pedestrian crossings, lack of neighborhood sidewalks, and lack of pedestrian shade trees or shade structures.
- Existing circulation patterns can exacerbate traffic and parking challenges.
- Many believe that the back-in angled parking on South Congress causes vehicle delays and safety issues. SoCo stakeholders emphasized that back-in angled parking was implemented with little input from local businesses and residents.
- The lack of pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, including lighting and street trees, may reduce visitor willingness to walk even short distances to and from a parking spot. Walkability is especially limited during the hot summer months.
- Though changes to South Congress are generally desired, the potential for disruption during road construction and the uncertainty of change is a concern for both local business owners and residents.
- With few designated pick-up/drop-off areas in the neighborhood, ride-hailing vehicles often stop in unsafe locations and disrupt other traffic.

- Commercial vehicles sometimes compete for loading space with some parkers, especially on alleyways behind South Congress businesses.

**Systemic changes in the neighborhood further complicate and exacerbate the parking challenges.**

- As neighborhood growth has put additional pressure on the available parking supply, tensions about who should have access to on-street parking have increased—many business owners believe the RPP system is a privatization of a public good, while many residents believe business owners have neglected to provide sufficient parking themselves to meet the needs of their customers and employees.
- The rise of short-term rentals in the residential areas adjacent to South Congress Avenue further complicates perceptions about who is using and benefiting from neighborhood parking.
- Most businesses and long-term residents value the historic, low(er)-density character of the neighborhood, and some are averse to projects which threaten to add density or allow structured parking.
- Developments at the northern and southern end of the study area may soon provide significant off-street parking supply. These developments offer opportunity to expand corridor parking supply through a shared parking program. These “nodes” must be connected to the neighborhood with mobility improvements.
- Spillover parking from South 1<sup>st</sup> Street is also increasing pressure on neighborhood parking supply in the blocks adjacent to South Congress.

**The economics of parking in the district needs to be revisited.**

- “Hide-and-ride” users—commuters who park on South Congress Avenue and ride the bus into downtown for work—are taking advantage of free and unregulated on-street parking, which would otherwise be available to neighborhood employees, residents, and visitors.
- RPP permit prices are very low; while there is a limit to how much can be legally charged for permits, a pricing structure that better recognizes the “market value” of on-street parking may be needed.
- Some types of parking programs are prohibitively expensive to enforce, even with new technologies. For example, the cost of deploying parking officers to enforce hourly time restrictions is typically greater than the ticket revenues collected, even with license plate recognition technology.

**There is a sense of neighborhood fatigue around all of these issues.**

- Business owners, property owners, and neighborhood residents expressed frustration about long-running parking discussions and studies which have yielded few actionable results.
- Many stakeholders believe that dialogue with city staff and elected officials to express frustrations and implement solutions have not been successful.

## WALKING TOUR

A walking tour of the South Congress neighborhood was held on Thursday, April 25<sup>th</sup>. Approximately 15 stakeholder attendees convened to walk through the neighborhood and review parking conditions in the study area. Many of the discussion points raised in the stakeholder meetings were observed in the field, including RPP regulations, pedestrian and biking conditions, informal shared parking arrangements, wayfinding and signage, and back-in parking dynamics.

