There is no such thing as free parking.

By Simon Pelletier

On the street out in front of my home there is a road. It is four car lanes wide. Two cars one way, two the other. There is free parking on the lane closest to the curb. One lane for eastbound and one lane for westbound. The centre two lanes are dedicated to all day traffic. This is fairly typical for most of Winnipeg and every other city I have seen in North America.

These extra lanes are allocated for free parking. The expected use of these lanes is for people who are coming to the neighbourhood to be able to park. If we have this all over the city then we can expect to drive to any other part of the city and be able to park our car free of charge. This makes car use convenient and easy. It allows us to walk out the front door of our home and drive somewhere without worrying about where exactly to park our vehicle on the other end of our journey. This is the benefit of free parking.

What then is the cost? What do we forego when we allow for this free parking to occur? I see two potential scenarios.

Scenario One Let us consider a situation in which we charge for the use of every single parking space in the city. How likely would you be to use your car if you paid a non-trivial amount of money for parking anywhere you went? Let's take it one step further and make all the parking adjustable based on density and demand. So we would have more expensive parking at peak hours and at peak densities. An example. Let's say you want to go to your friends Nate's house for dinner after work. You get home a little late and you know it takes 20 minutes to walk there. If parking is free you'd just drive, park on his street and be on time for dinner. But since it's 5pm, peak rush hour, and Nate lives in central Winnipeg then you know his street charges $20/hr in the evening. Would you walk to his place and be 15 mins late or pay the $20? This kind of nudge is known to affect many peoples decisions. The cumulative effect of this type of pricing would reduce the number of these rather small drives and likely reduce the amount of traffic during peak hours and in densely occupied places.

Scenario Two Imagine instead of having these lanes of parking we got rid of the 4 lane street entirely and had just two lanes. Throughout the city you'd only have driveways and back lanes where cars could park. You'd be unable to drive anywhere with your car without

confirming if your friend or business had a parking space that you could use. In this scenario owning and driving a car would be significantly more difficult to manage. It's mostly likely car ownership wouldn't really work since many people just couldn't get around the city. Here we'd probably see car use for transporting of goods and for public transport but not for personal use. The whole city would itself be much more compact since we would be reducing the street width in general by fifty percent. Significantly less car use, a 50% smaller city and the general public wouldn't be able to use a car for getting around the city. That would be the cost of this system.

Free parking results in increased amount of car use. For the individual it allows for a freedom to drive their car throughout the city without much cost to themselves. On a societal level we pay for this parking with a larger city and longer distances to travel as well as an increase in congestion and noise from cars.

If we charged for parking everywhere it would allow for personal use of cars but an increased cost. Perhaps a way to properly map the actual societal cost of each individual choice to drive somewhere.

If we removed all parking from the city we would have neighbourhoods that are denser and more tightly knit as well as a significant reduction in individual car ownership and use. More biking, more walking, more public transport.