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Playing the Slots: Technology's Growing Role in Bringing Efficiency to Parking.

Los Angeles and San Francisco are jumping into variable-rate parking in a big way.

Using technology to implement roadway pricing has a lot going for it. Approaches such as variable highway tolls can reduce congestion by better managing demand, improving customer service and providing a revenue source for public transit, which in turn takes vehicles off the road.

Now Los Angeles and San Francisco are among the cities taking a similar concept and applying it to make it easier to find a parking space.

[LA Express Park](#), a pilot program that covers a 4.5 square-mile area of downtown, uses technology to match on-street parking prices with demand. Its goal is to ensure that between 10 and 30 percent of the parking spaces on each block are open throughout the day. "Smart meters" and sensors compile occupancy and payment data. Based on that information, a pricing algorithm recommends parking rates for various times of day that are designed to ensure that meters are used but that no area is overly congested.

San Francisco has a longer history with dynamic parking pricing. [SFpark](#) began in 2011. It's in use over a wider swath of the city and also covers city-owned parking garages. Similar to LA Express Park, it aims to achieve a consistent space-occupancy rate of about 85 percent. In some ways, SFpark is more precise. For example, it applies special rates around AT&T Park during Giants baseball games.

SFpark and LA Express Park both offer free apps that provide users with real-time space-availability information.

As parking expert Donald Shoup, a professor of urban planning at UCLA, puts it, these programs "reduce cruising, speed up buses, [and] reduce air pollution." By minimizing the experience of driving around endlessly in search of a parking space that all of us who live in and around big cities know all too well, they also improve customer service.

Since parking patterns change continuously, adjustments to LA Express Park rates take effect on the first Monday of each month and are made public in advance. SFpark rates change less frequently — no more than every other month.

In Los Angeles, pilot-wide rates have decreased by 11 percent but revenue is up by 2 percent, thanks to better utilization of parking spaces and the increased rates in high-demand areas. The pattern has been similar in San Francisco.

Thus far, neither program has been used to raise significant new revenue, but the technology could certainly facilitate that. For example, meter hours could be extended past the typical 6 p.m. in areas that are busy in the evening.

One challenge these programs face is awareness. A survey in Los Angeles found that 76 percent of drivers would choose to park in a less-expensive space a little farther from their destinations, but those drivers must know about the dynamic-pricing plan to take advantage of it.

In transportation, we've increasingly seen in recent years that when technology is applied to improve customer service, it can also enhance revenue and create environmental benefits. Early results from San Francisco and Los Angeles suggest the same is true for parking.

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