

Parking Enforcement, Ambassador Program, and Revenue Options

Parking Enforcement Rationale

Downtown parking in the City of Saugatuck experiences its highest demand during the summer season, from Memorial Day to Labor Day, when visitor activity peaks and parking occupancy approaches capacity. Of the 906 on-street parking spaces in the Central Business District (CBD), 561 are governed by posted time limits intended to promote turnover and ensure short-term parking availability for customers, visitors, and service trips. However, the City currently relies on complaint-based enforcement rather than routine patrols, which significantly limits the effectiveness of these time limits. Without consistent enforcement, extended and all-day parking occurs in prime downtown locations, reducing access for short-term users and diminishing the credibility of posted parking regulations. Routine, visible enforcement is necessary to ensure that time-limited parking functions as intended and supports downtown economic activity.

Without enforcement, there is no effective mechanism to prevent business owners and employees from using time-limited spaces. They know that enforcement is not taking place, and so, in many cases, time limits are ignored. The consequence is that many time-limited spaces are occupied for eight or ten hours by a single vehicle, which defeats the purpose of the time limits, blocks visitor and customer access, and reduces the turnover and use of these spaces.

Enforcement Period and Operational Assumptions

This assessment assumes a seasonal parking enforcement program operating daily from Memorial Day through Labor Day, an estimated 98-day period. Enforcement is assumed to occur seven days a week between 9:00 a.m. and 9:00 p.m., for a total of 12 hours per day. The analysis focuses exclusively on the 561 time-limited on-street parking spaces within the CBD. All cost and revenue estimates represent planning-level assumptions intended to support policy discussion and should be refined during implementation planning.

Estimated Annual Cost of Parking Enforcement

Rather than relying on sworn law enforcement, the City could implement a dedicated parking enforcement or parking ambassador model similar to those used in peer seasonal and resort communities. For effective downtown coverage, two staff members would be required on duty at any given time to circulate through time-limited areas, provide visibility, and monitor compliance.

Based on this approach, total seasonal staffing would equal approximately 2,352 hours (two staff multiplied by 12 hours per day over 98 days). Assuming a fully loaded hourly cost of \$40 per hour, inclusive of wages, benefits, payroll taxes, uniforms, supervision, and basic equipment, the estimated annual seasonal cost of parking enforcement would be approximately \$94,080.

Estimated Citation Revenue

In recent years, the City has issued relatively few parking citations due to limited enforcement. With the introduction of consistent daily enforcement, citation volumes would be expected to increase initially. A conservative planning assumption is that 2-4% of time-limited spaces generate 1 citation per day. Using a

midpoint assumption of 3 percent, approximately 17 citations per day would be anticipated across the 561 regulated spaces, resulting in an estimated 1,666 citations during the 98-day enforcement season.

At an average citation value of \$25, this level of enforcement would generate approximately \$41,650 in gross seasonal citation revenue. Over time, citation volumes would likely decline as compliance improves, which represents a desired operational outcome rather than a performance shortfall.

Parking Ambassador Program

A parking ambassador program would combine enforcement, customer service, and public education. Ambassadors would be uniformed, highly visible staff who patrol downtown on foot or bicycle, monitor time limits, issue warnings and citations, answer parking-related questions, assist with wayfinding, and serve as a visible point of contact for visitors. This approach emphasizes compliance and visitor experience rather than punitive enforcement alone and supports downtown businesses by maintaining turnover while preserving a welcoming atmosphere.

The benefits of a Parking Ambassador Program are as follows:

1. Improves Parking Turnover Without Over-Policing. Parking ambassadors provide consistent and visible enforcement of time-limited parking. This discourages all-day parking in short-term spaces and helps ensure turnover, making spaces available for customers, visitors, and service trips without relying on sworn officers.
2. Enhances Visitor Experience and Downtown Image. Ambassadors serve as a friendly, approachable point of contact. In addition to monitoring parking, they assist with wayfinding, answer questions, explain parking rules or technology, and provide information about local businesses and attractions.
3. Increases Voluntary Compliance and Reduces Conflict. Because ambassadors emphasize education and communication first, drivers are more likely to comply voluntarily. This approach reduces confrontational interactions and helps build public understanding and acceptance of parking management.
4. Frees Police Resources and Controls Costs. Using non-sworn ambassadors for parking management allows police departments to focus on higher-priority public safety needs. Ambassador programs are also less costly and can be scaled seasonally to match demand.
5. Supports Economic Vitality of Downtown Businesses. By keeping prime spaces available for short-term use, ambassador programs support downtown merchants and restaurants by improving customer access and encouraging repeat visits.
6. Provides a Platform for Education and Phased Implementation. Ambassadors are especially effective during the rollout of new parking programs. Warning periods, education campaigns, and on-street assistance can be used to ease the transition and build goodwill while reinforcing long-term expectations.

The following Michigan cities use a parking or downtown ambassador program:

- St. Joseph. Operates a seasonal Downtown Ambassador Program to support its paid parking system. Ambassadors explain parking rules, assist with pay stations and mobile apps, and provide visitor information during peak tourism months.

- Kalamazoo. Downtown Kalamazoo employs ambassadors who provide wayfinding, visitor assistance, and on-street presence seven days a week, supporting parking and general downtown functionality.
- Grand Rapids. Grand Rapids operates one of Michigan’s most established downtown ambassador programs. Ambassadors assist with wayfinding, answer visitor questions, provide event support, and coordinate with parking facilities and parking rules.
- Petoskey. Petoskey uses downtown ambassadors focused on customer service, education, and greeting visitors in managed parking and commercial areas, particularly during peak seasons.
- East Lansing. East Lansing employs parking ambassadors to oversee city parking lots, garages, and meters while assisting customers and supporting compliance.
- Ann Arbor. Parking ambassadors combine enforcement, wayfinding, and customer service in high-demand visitor environments, demonstrating the effectiveness of the ambassador model outside of traditional policing.

Warning and Amnesty Program Options

To ease implementation and build public support, the City could establish a structured warning-and-amnesty policy. First-time violations during a defined introductory period, such as the first 30 days of the enforcement season, may result in written warnings rather than citations. In addition, the City could offer a limited amnesty period during which outstanding parking citations may be reduced or dismissed if paid within a specified timeframe. Such programs encourage compliance, improve the collection of older citations, and foster goodwill without permanently weakening enforcement effectiveness.

Improving Citation Collection and Compliance

Currently, the City lacks a formal citation-tracking and collection process, and there is no mechanism to pursue out-of-state violators. To improve outcomes, the City should adopt a structured citation management system that tracks unpaid citations, issues reminder notices, applies late fees, and escalates delinquent accounts where legally permitted.

For out-of-state visitors, the City could contract with a third-party parking citation processing and collections firm capable of interstate follow-up and mailed notice programs. Implementing basic citation management software or outsourced collections would significantly improve compliance rates, reduce administrative burden, and ensure that enforcement efforts result in actual payment and behavior change.

Summary

This assessment notes that downtown Saugatuck's peak summer parking demand is undermined by complaint-based enforcement, which allows all-day parking in prime spots and reduces turnover for visitors. It suggests a seasonal program from Memorial Day to Labor Day, employing visible, non-sworn staff to enforce limits, educate the public, and assist visitors. Estimated costs are \$94,080, with projected citation revenue of \$41,650, expecting citations to decline as compliance improves. The ambassador program aims to enhance customer service, support local businesses, and free police resources. The plan emphasizes warning and amnesty options during rollout, along with better citation tracking and collections, especially from out-of-state visitors, to ensure long-term success.