

## Double-Parkers Blamed for Tie-Ups

Lax Enforcement Allows Gridlock to Ripple Outward, Commuters Say

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*One in an occasional series*

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It only takes one.

One vehicle illegally parked on busy commuter corridors, such as Constitution and Massachusetts avenues, can back up rush-hour traffic as far as the eye can see.

One delivery truck illegally double-parked can quickly shrink the capacity of a downtown street by as much as 40 percent.

Double-parked vehicles can also make designated evacuation routes, such as Connecticut and New York avenues, look more like parking lots than escape routes.

Illegal parking creates some of the most frequent tie-ups for traffic trying to get across Washington.

The Washington Post this week continues a series on how traffic problems might be eased relatively quickly and cheaply in an era when big and expensive solutions are less likely. Commuters, police, traffic experts, delivery companies and business leaders said they have plenty of ideas on how to ease congestion caused by parking problems.

Among them: Ticket or tow illegally parked vehicles more aggressively, particularly during rush hour. That would discourage illegal parking, advocates said, and the program would pay for itself through fines and towing fees.

Limit deliveries to overnight hours, or at least prohibit them during rush periods. Put parking meters in delivery areas so commercial vehicles can't tie up curb space by parking all day. Extend rush-hour parking prohibitions to a longer time for the lengthening rush periods to clear out. Prohibit restaurants from tying up travel lanes with valet parking.

Business leaders and delivery companies said the city needs to find more efficient ways to use alleys and off-street loading docks. Delivery companies also could provide more financial incentives for customers to combine orders.

"Emergency arteries like Connecticut Avenue and K Street need to be clear all the time," said Marcia Rosenthal, executive director of the Golden Triangle Business Improvement District west of downtown. "When trucks double-park in front of buildings on Connecticut Avenue are tying up lanes in rush hour, that clearly doesn't send the message that the city is moving."

Dan Tangherlini, the District's transportation director, said he's well aware of the problems that parking scofflaws create.

"We have to really ensure that we're operating at peak capacity every day," Tangherlini said. With city street overburdened, he said, "you have these enormous ripple effects when someone takes a lane."

Other cities have targeted double-parking. Boston increased the number of loading zones in its shopping district during the morning hours, when deliveries are especially frequent.

New York added parking meters to its delivery zones in midtown Manhattan, charging \$2 for the first hour and higher prices for each subsequent hour. That encourages turnover and reduces the need for delivery trucks to double-park next to curb lanes jammed with trucks parked all day. Three years ago, San Francisco doubled fines for double-parking on major bus routes during rush hours and began immediately towing private vehicles parked in loading zones.

### **Little Action in District**

So far, the District has done little to fix the problem. Two years ago, the city spent \$2 million on 25 tow trucks for 24-hour parking enforcement. However, half of them sit idle at any one time because the city didn't budget enough drivers.

The District also tripled the number of parking enforcement officers in the past two years, but one-fifth of the positions are vacant, city officials said.

Meanwhile, some delivery company operators whose trucks get caught double-parking said police and parking enforcement officers routinely look the other way or simply ask them to move along rather than tow or ticket. They said they budget up to \$250,000 annually for parking tickets in the District, because they consider it a cost of doing business. They complain that the city has allowed many of its alleys to be developed, leaving entire blocks without off-street parking.

Many commuters said they wonder why they see so few tickets on the windshields of illegally parked vehicles if more aren't towed out of the way.

Larry Spinelli, 51, of Arlington said vehicles illegally parked on the north side of Constitution Avenue between 14th and 15th streets NW add as much as 15 minutes to his homebound commute each day.

"What's so irritating is, if at least they had a ticket on [the windshield], you'd think at least this person is being taught a lesson and the city is making some money," Spinelli said. "But almost all of the time there's no ticket."

Bill McCloskey, 58, of Bethesda said he routinely sees U.S. Postal Service trucks tying up streets near his downtown office by double-parking, even when there are available parking spaces nearby. He said he leaves for work 30 minutes earlier than he needs to because he never knows when cars illegally parked on inbound Massachusetts Avenue just south of Nebraska Avenue will slow his Metro bus. He said he sees a tow truck maybe once a week.

"It just takes one [to create backups] because all the traffic is going into one lane," McCloskey said. "It's as bad as a wreck."

Traffic experts say he's right. In fact, the impact of an illegally parked vehicle goes beyond the lane it blocks because the adjacent lanes must accommodate the extra traffic squeezing past the parked vehicle.

The forced merging can reduce the capacity of the adjacent lane by up to 30 percent and cut the average speed to half, said Hani S. Mahmassani, director of the Maryland Transportation Initiative, a University of Maryland institute that studies transportation problems. The impacts grow more severe if the illegally parked car backs into an intersection because the resulting "spill-back effect" can create gridlock, he said.

### **Double Trouble**

Double-parking "basically makes the traffic a lot more vulnerable to breaking down," Mahmassani said.

However, he said, cities also must make tradeoffs between using roads to accelerate traffic flow and using them to provide access to homes and businesses by allowing a certain amount of parking. Cracking down on motorists who park illegally out of convenience or laziness is different from going after delivery trucks that might have no choice, he said.

"If you have a store that needs a delivery, that truck is going to have to park," Mahmassani said. "How else are they going to do their business?"

Delivery companies said they often are forced to double-park. Much of the scarce street parking space is lost to construction and commuters who get away with feeding the meters, delivery companies said. The number of on-street loading zones and off-street loading docks pale compared with the number of trucks needing to use them.

Some delivery companies said they could easily adapt to limiting their runs to overnight hours. However, the most of their customers don't want the added cost of having an employee meet the truck in the middle of the night.

UPS budgets \$250,000 annually for parking tickets in the District, said Dan McMackin, a company spokesman. "UPS trucks double-park, he said, "the vast majority of times loading zones are full with cars. . . . We certainly obey traffic laws, but sometimes they have no choice but to double-park."

David Guernsey, president and chief executive of Chantilly-based Guernsey Office Products, said his firm budgets \$30,000 annually for parking tickets. He said the availability of loading docks and other legal parking areas is limited that he'd be open to a rush-hour ban on deliveries downtown, which would be easier on his drivers.

However, Guernsey said, the "overwhelming number" of times his drivers double-park, they don't get a ticket.

"Quite frankly, the police force looks the other way because they know there's no place to park," Guernsey said. "The political ramifications would be great if you couldn't get deliveries in or the cost of the deliveries skyrocketed for businesses in those buildings."

### **Enforcement Needed**

Some commuters and business officials question whether too many motorists and truck drivers double-park out of sheer laziness.

District police and city parking officers share responsibility for enforcement. D.C. Police Chief Charles H. Ramsey said he doesn't have enough officers to dedicate a unit full time to parking violations. While patrol officers can enforce parking rules, he said, he doesn't mind if they forgo ticketing or towing violators.

"If your goal is to clear up traffic and if they comply and move the car, I don't have a problem with them not ticket," Ramsey said.

The D.C. Department of Public Works has more than tripled the number of parking enforcement officers in the last two years, said spokeswoman Mary Myers. However, a \$24,000 annual salary and requirements to work in a hot sun and sometimes around angry motorists create a high turnover rate. One-fifth of the 236 positions are vacant.

"We're trying to cover 1,100 miles of streets around-the-clock with somewhere over 200 parking officers," said Hotaling, the city's public works director. "That's a lot spread thin."

Hotaling said parking enforcement officers often don't hand out the \$50 tickets for double-parking if drivers move their vehicles.

"It's faster to ask them to move along than to stop them to write a ticket and get into an argument about the ticket," Hotaling said. "If that works to move people along, that's the objective."

The city bought 25 tow trucks, valued at \$80,000 apiece, to tow illegally parked vehicles out of the way 24 hours a day, Hotaling said. However, it allotted only enough money for drivers to have 11 operating during the morning rush and 13 during the afternoon rush.

Hotaling said the city won't contract with private tow trucks for parking enforcement. Another challenge: Towing an illegally parked car to the Addison Road impoundment lot can take one tow truck an hour during morning and evening peak, hardly an efficient use of the truck. There's little extra room on city streets to tow them to a legal parking lot.

Still, Hotaling conceded, the District has not cracked down on illegal parking as aggressively as some other cities, such as New York.

"I'd be willing to try zero tolerance," Hotaling said, "until we tow the first congressman's or senator's car who's parked to run into a Starbucks."

**Tomorrow:** *Making road work less onerous.*