

The Day of Reckoning: Is It Time To Increase Parking Stall Dimensions?



Figure 1

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The day of reckoning for our years of benefiting from the downsizing of the American car may finally be at hand. In simplest terms, the design vehicle used for parking dimensions among new vehicle sales changed more in calendar year 1998 than it did in the previous 15 years combined. This is primarily due to soaring sales of sport-utility vehicles, which are wider than cars.

To analyze the change of vehicle sizes over time, automobiles and light-truck vehicle units (LTVUs) have been

classified by the area, with those being classified as small typically being less than 6 feet by 15 feet. Figure 1 presents the percent of small cars (not including LTVUs) sold since the 1970s, while Figure 2 compares the vehicles sold in each classification — cars, light trucks, vans and sport utility vehicles, as well as overall — since 1987. Sales of small cars climbed from under 25 percent in 1978 to over 50 percent in 1980 but then held at that level through the end of the decade. Through the 1990s however, the sales of small cars have dropped back to

below 35 percent in 1998. Meanwhile, sales of pickups, vans and sport utility vehicles (SUVs) have markedly increased, as seen in Figure 3.

The net result of the soaring sales of large SUVs is that the percent of small SUVs has plummeted from 86 percent in 1994 to 25 percent in 1998. This, combined with the decline in sales of small pickups, has widened the gap between the percent of small cars sold (33.9 percent in 1998) and percent of all vehicles sold (23.5 percent in 1998) to 10 percentage points.

While there remains a hard core

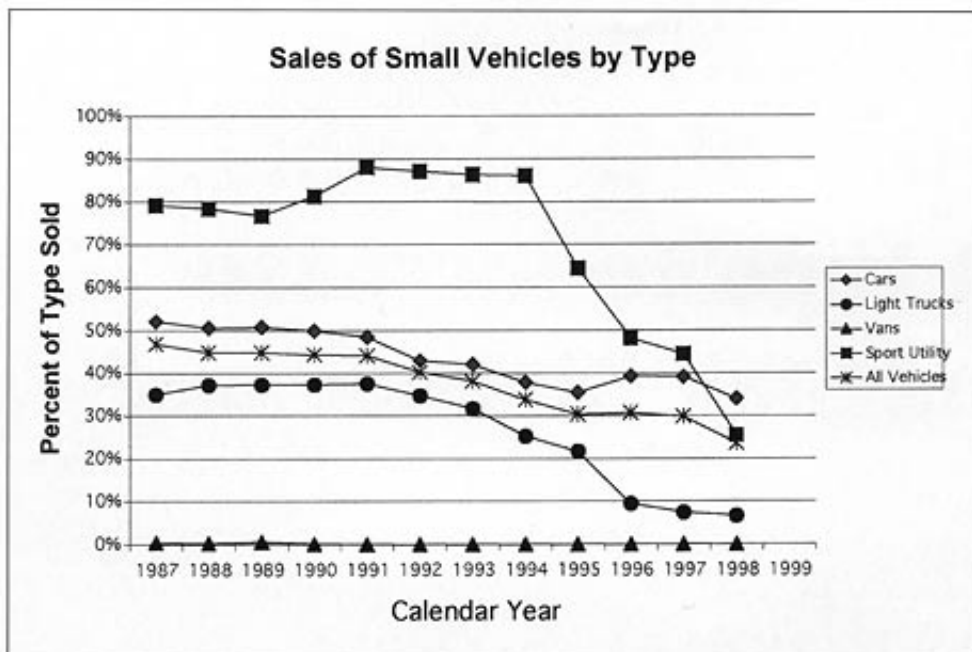


Figure 2

group devoted to their Suburbans and Dodge Ram trucks that will be attracted to new products like the behemoth Ford Excursion, it appears that a lot of the people now driving SUVs will move down to the latest trendy vehicle, the hybrid sport utility wagon (SUW). Created by Subaru in 1996 with its Outback model, the hybrid SUWs are four-wheel-drive vehicles built on car chassis, but with more ground clearance and other SUV-like features. Honda, Mercedes and Lexus have already jumped on the band wagon and most other manufacturers will have models within a year or two. In fact, the Lexus RX300 is already Lexus' most popular model, outselling the ES300 and LS 400 sedans combined through the first eight months of 1999.

Based on automobile industry forecasts, it appears that the size of vehicles will be relatively stable through about 2005. It does not appear that the percentage of small vehicles sold will decline much further, but the primary growth will be in SUWs in the middle of the market, size-wise. While the percentage of vehicles that qualify as small on the road today lags behind the figures for new vehicle sales, within five years the percent of small vehicles on the road should be around 25 percent.

Therefore, at the turn of the millennium, the small-car-only stall is dying, if not dead. The problem with all these SUVs, pick up trucks and SUWs is that they are at least 3 inches wider than cars, applying pressure to increase stall widths from the typical 8-foot 6-inch stall used since the mid-1970s to 8 feet by 9 inches or more.

Cities are removing the provisions for small car only stalls (SCOs) in their ordinances. Parking facility owner/operators are beginning to restripe to

eliminate small car only stalls and/or increase standard stall widths. In some cases where very generous modules were employed, the angle of parking can be adjusted to minimize the loss of stalls. The user today would rather have the more comfortable stall width than a generous module. Unfortunately there aren't any easy solutions for properties that already have a lot of SCO stalls, other than to accept a loss in capacity that can exceed 10 percent where a high proportion of the stalls provided were SCO.

For further information, contact Walker Parking Consultants @ www.walkerparking.com. **SCB**

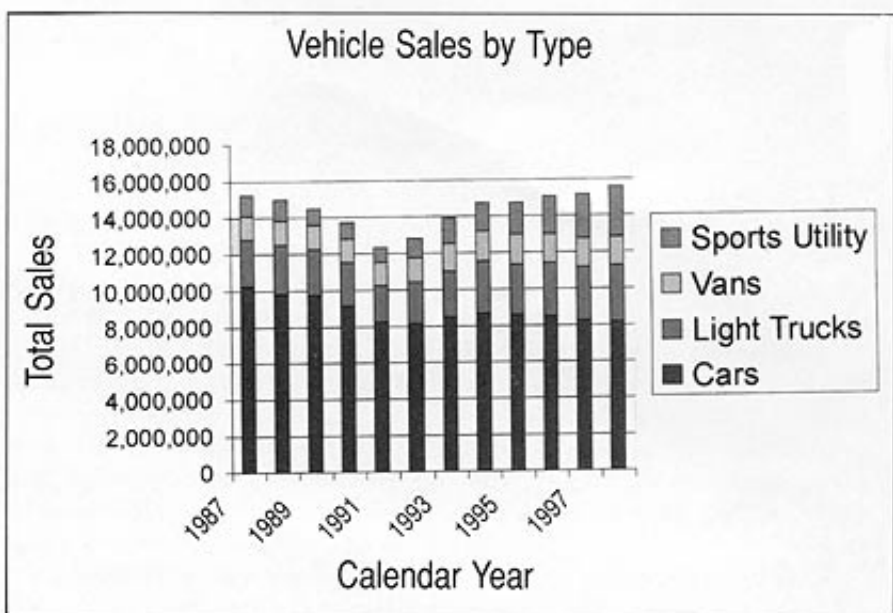


Figure 3