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Cell Phone Lots Can Ease Traffic Congestion, Pollution

Picking up airline passengers is a bit trickier in this post-Sept. 11 world. Drivers are no longer allowed to wait curbside, and circling the terminal is restricted due to the significant traffic impact on airport roadways and the increase in pollution it causes.

According to the National Association of Air Traffic Controllers, nearly 19% of flight arrivals in the U.S. were delayed an average of 12 minutes or more in February. Additionally, an average of 3.5% of flights were cancelled completely. These factors can make it difficult to know when travelers will arrive and when to pick them up. If drivers don't intend to park and meet their party inside the terminal, they may be unaware of delays or cancellations and forced to aimlessly circle the terminal looking for their party.

Cell phone lots, also referred to as waiting lots, are increasingly being developed to ease traffic congestion around the terminal and to provide a free, safe place for drivers to wait for a phone call alerting them that their party has arrived and is ready to be picked up.

The concept sounds simple, but there are many considerations that an airport parking operator or facility owner must weigh when deciding whether to build a cell phone lot. Some of the questions that must be asked include:

- Where should the lot be located?
- How many spaces should it contain?
- How much will it cost to implement?
- How should it be marketed to the public?
- What are some alternatives to cell phone lots?

This article will explore the factors that must be taken into account when deciding whether a cell phone lot is a wise option for your airport. Examples from several airports that have cell phone lots in operation are provided to examine existing trends and operations.



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Does Your Airport Need A Cell Phone Lot?

A group of airport operators who currently have cell phone lots in operation considered the following most important when deciding to implement a cell phone lot:

• Customer service	100%
• Responding to political considerations	89%
• Relieving curbside congestion	77%
• Freeing up existing parking space in other locations	22%

The percentages noted above signify the fraction of airport operators who included each respective factor in their list.

Reducing curbside and roadway congestion is a goal at most heavily trafficked airports. If a driver makes one trip through the airport roadways and uses a cell phone lot to wait for a passenger, as opposed to circling three or four times through, hundreds or even thousands of trips through the airport can be saved each day. This leads to significant reductions in auto emissions, fuel and unsafe conditions caused by the merging of vehicles parked on the shoulders of the roadways onto busy roads.

The installation of a cell phone lot is beneficial for customer relations because it sends a message that the airport cares about creating an easy, stress-free experience for travelers, as well as helping drivers reduce the amount of gas they would otherwise consume by circling the terminal.

Several airports also reported that they

received requests from local citizens, airport commission boards or local elected officials who had heard of the implementation of cell phone lots at other airports and wanted one installed at their local airport. It's important to consider political pressures such as these when deciding whether to install a cell phone lot. Again, it can be a good chance to show customers and local officials that they are being

listened to and that their opinions and travel experiences are important.

Whatever the factors are in determining the need for a cell phone lot at your airport, there are several points to consider in the success of the operation.

Location. Typically, cell phone lots are placed in an existing parking facility or wherever available land remains. Ease of access and visibility from the airport property entrances, as well as adjacency to the terminals, are all factors to be considered in the placement of a cell phone lot.

A cell phone lot should not be too close or too far from the terminals. If the lot is too far, drivers may feel it is going to take them too long to get to the terminal once their party is ready to be picked up. If the lot is too close, it may entice some to attempt to park for free and walk over to the terminal, potentially costing the airport short-term parking revenue. Generally, drive time between the lot and the terminals should

be between three and five minutes.

Size. Usually, the size of a cell phone lot has been a function of the number of spaces that fit within whatever remaining land may exist on an airport's property, or within the existing number of spaces in an underutilized surface lot. It can be quite difficult to determine how many spaces are necessary, as the amount of airport traffic usually changes depending on flight schedules, volume of passengers, usage of mass transit and the availability of other short-term parking options.

Based on the 2007 deplanement statistics for the 10 busiest U.S. airports that have cell phone lots, the number of spaces provided per 1,000 deplanements falls between 0.93 and 3.08, with a median of 1.28 spaces. This fairly large range results mainly because many of these airports determined their lot size by solely taking space availability into account and not as a more specific function of need. Many airports are implementing cell phone lots on a trial basis and plan on adjusting the lot's capacity according to usage over time.

Cost. The implementation cost of a cell phone lot is a function of how the lot was created. If the lot is a repurposed existing parking facility, the cost of its

installation and maintenance may be quite low: approximately \$20 per space for restriping fees. Alternatively, the creation of a new lot may cost as much as \$2,500 to \$3,000 per space including paving, striping and basic lighting.

Additional costs for signage and education materials will also vary. One surveyed airport spent only \$200 for a road sign, while another spent approximately \$30,000 for a signage campaign throughout the airport property. In addition to static road signs, some airports have included electronic signage to recommend usage of cell phone lots and to tell drivers when short-term lots are full.

An effective campaign or signage program can be vital to a lot's usage and acceptance. Some airports have deployed radio advertisements, included information on airport Web sites and even administered small maps to drivers attempting to wait at the curb by curbside management officers. These handouts act as a friendly method of telling drivers to move along by providing them with clear directions to an alternative location.


Amenities. Some airports are adding amenities to cell phone lots to make them a more attractive option for drivers. Amenities

include flight information display systems so that drivers may monitor the status of passengers' flights, as well as restrooms, vending machines and even Wi-Fi hot spots. Although most lots have regulations requiring drivers to remain in their vehicles, some airports have added picnic tables. All of these amenities are aimed at providing a high level of customer service and creating a pleasant airport experience.

What Are The Alternatives?

If your airport is not yet ready to implement a cell phone lot or if you don't have enough space to sufficiently house one, there are some alternatives that various airports have turned to in an effort to reduce curbside congestion. Many have integrated a grace period in short-term parking facilities in which less than 15 or 30 minutes of parking is free. The grace period may or may not be advertised to the user, and may also be used in conjunction with or instead of a cell phone lot. Curbside management staff may distribute vouchers for free parking in lieu of cell phone lot parking. Other airports offer incentives for the use of mass transit in the form of coupons or vouchers.

With airports relying more and more on parking revenues, it may be surprising to find that many airports are now offering free parking. Although a marginal loss of income may occur from the installation of a cell phone lot, client dissatisfaction, traffic congestion, safety hazards and energy consumption resulting in pollution can also be reduced by the implementation of these lots. In the eyes of many airport operations managers, the benefits largely outweigh the negatives. In the eyes of many airport patrons, the option of a cell phone lot is not only welcomed, but is expected.

Although the cell phone lot may have been introduced to resolve curbside issues post-Sept. 11, we see the solution as a long-term remedy that, if implemented appropriately, can serve airport operators and patrons well. 

We'd like to hear your feedback on this article. Please direct all correspondence to Jody L. Todd at jody.todd@walkerparking.com or Michael Civitelli at michael.civitelli@walkerparking.com. Visit Walker Parking Consultants' Web site at www.walkerparking.com