Seeking other options for commuting to IU

Even as newest IU campus garage opens, report calls for better alternatives to driving

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On the same day Indiana University raised the gate on its new 550-space parking garage on South Henderson Street, the IU Task Force on Campus Sustainability issued a report that includes a plea for a more environmentally friendly approach to commuting and parking on campus.

Citing high percentages of employees and students who drive — most often alone — to and on campus, the task force concludes that IU Bloomington is "too reliant on cars for transportation and with too few attractive alternatives." It calls for a sustainable transportation policy that supports "compact growth and multiuse development, where walking, bicycling and bussing are more practical."

The campus has some way to go before it achieves that goal, but it's taking steps in the right direction, according to Paul Sullivan, chairman of the sustainability task force and head of its transportation work group.

"A lot of positive things are happening now with the B-line Trail, the proposed bike/pedestrian routes through city and the campus and the continued growth of the bus system, and we need to build on those," he said. "I think this will be a major focus of the campus master planning process that will be taking place over the next year."

Long-term concern

This isn't the first time IU has studied parking problems on campus. Various committees have looked at the issue over the decades, and a lengthy report in 1992 resulted in a five-year plan to reduce the percentage of people driving to campus. In the 15 years since that report, the campus bus system has improved significantly, parking enforcement has been strengthened and parking permit fees have increased beyond the inflation rate, the sustainability task force found.

The group added several current positives, such as large numbers of students living on or near campus, as well as attractive housing close to campus for employees. But it also identified numerous weaknesses: a lack of clear, low-stress pedestrian and bike routes to campus; poor pedestrian infrastructure outside the core campus; inadequate attention to bicycle and pedestrian improvements; and a fragmented approach to accessibility.

A 1998 survey of students, faculty and staff found almost 80 percent of faculty and staff and 23 percent of students drove to campus. More recent numbers for faculty and staff don't exist, but students were surveyed again in 2001 with similar results. Parking operations manager Doug Porter said only four or five groups take advantage of a carpooling option.

The task force says the key to sustainable transportation is reducing reliance on the car — and that will take dedicated staff, money and a campus-wide initiative to decrease official employee automobile travel.

A complex problem

IU isn't alone in its quest to improve traffic and parking issues. City centers and campuses across the country are struggling with similar issues in an increasingly car-dependent culture. Parking in particular has become a focal point for urban planners seeking solutions to traffic congestion and pollution, said John Ottensmann, director of urban planning and policy at the Center for Urban Policy and the Environment at IUPUI in Indianapolis.

"I haven't seen anything broadly looking at issues of campuses, but any individual university is constantly struggling with these issues because most of them have parking problems," Ottensmann said. Universities have dealt with congestion by providing options such as remote parking with shuttles, better public transportation and free bus passes for students and employees, he said. IUPUI has done all of those things.

Ottensmann said there's a school of thought that says one way to encourage people to use public transport and to reduce congestion is to reduce the amount of free or low-cost parking.

"An issue in terms of implementing it in a reasonable manner is whether or not there is adequate public transportation available as an alternative," Ottensmann said. "If there isn't, that ends up creating additional kinds of problems."

What should parking cost?

Making parking expensive, Ottensmann said, is a recognized way of getting people to stop driving. At some Big Ten universities, parking fees are three or four times the cost of parking at IU. While IU charges $300 a year for its most expensive parking pass, the University of Wisconsin — Madison charges more than $1,000 and the University of Minnesota more than $1,400. The rates reflect the fact that both are urban campuses, but all other Big Ten schools except Purdue also charge more than IU.

Porter, of IU parking operations, said he's not in favor of raising rates just to get people to use alternative transportation. He said parking operations is a self-sustaining unit, and he doesn't support the idea of charging more than it costs to cover expenses.

"I don't think it's fair to employees," he said. "We have a lot of employees who aren't making six-figure salaries. I'm not a big fan of trying specifically to change people's behavior to make them miserable."

At the same time, he said he can't justify building more and more parking garages.

"It's difficult to raise the money, and I'm not sure it's needed," he said. "We don't need to build just so people can always park right next to where they work."

Porter prefers to give commuters choices that might encourage them to change their behavior. Educating employees and students about campus and city bus options — they're free for both groups — and encouraging them to walk on campus are better ideas, he said.

Wisconsin's alternatives

At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, carpooling is one of several successful alternative transportation programs.

"We are pretty aggressive," said Rob Kennedy, Transportation Demand Management manager and transportation planner. "We probably have the strongest alternative program in the country, and certainly in the Big Ten."

Kennedy said 90 percent of students walk, bike, take buses or use other alternative transportation. And more than 50 percent of faculty and staff choose options other than driving alone.

"The foundation for being successful in that regard is that we have some pretty strong management of parking," he said.

The campus agreed with the city of Madison to cap parking at 13,000 spaces for the 65,000 students, faculty and staff. Any new parking structures — above and below ground — have been built on existing surface lots, and two committees including representatives from the city and from neighborhood associations review all building plans. There's a campus transportation survey every two years.

Most students, faculty and staff in Madison have free passes on the regional bus system, Kennedy said. Cooperative arrangements with the county allow commuters to go online and instantly find a convenient carpool or vanpool — about 5 percent of employees take advantage of that system. There's a car-sharing program that allows people to drive fuel-efficient cars by the hour (IU is looking into a similar arrangement in conjunction with the city of Bloomington). And on warm days, as many as 11,000 cyclists park their bikes on campus.

"What you need is something like a comprehensive system of alternatives for people if they can't get inexpensive parking," Kennedy said. "The truth is, parking prices are set lower than what the market would actually bear."

Covering the cost of operations is "the old way of doing it" and the way his university operated until students said they wanted a better bus system, he said. Their action was the main catalyst that led to the current set-up.

"Most universities are in the process of developing more ambitious plans about these things," Kennedy said. "Given the current problems with emissions and energy, we probably can't do things the same way, but we have to make the alternatives convenient."

IU Bloomington transportation facts, figures

Employees who buy parking permits from Indiana University live cumulatively 44,000 miles from campus.

They travel an estimated 21 million miles annually and emit 10,000 tons of carbon dioxide.

In fiscal year 2007, university-owned vehicles traveled about 3 million miles. About half those miles are for on-campus trips.

70 percent of employees buying parking permits live within 5 miles of campus; 86 percent live within 10 miles and 92 percent within 15 miles.

56 percent of students live within 1 mile of campus; 95 percent live within 6 miles.

Recommendations

Transportation recommendations from Indiana University Task Force on Campus Sustainability:

-- Give alternative transportation equal consideration to automobile transportation in campus planning.

-- Designate one person and office on campus to oversee transportation sustainability.

-- Review parking policies, including fees.

-- Make parking revenue spending more flexible so it can be spent on other transportation initiatives.

-- Minimize energy use by campus vehicles.

-- Reduce travel within and between IU campuses.

-- Improve walking routes to campus.

-- Encourage faculty, students and staff to live within walking distance of campus.

-- Improve bikeways into and on campus.

-- Consider establishing dedicated bus lanes on campus.

-- Improve bus routes.

-- Coordinate with other transit providers.

-- Consider replacing surface parking lots with green space or residential housing.

-- Examine additional commuting options for employees, such as paying them to carpool and forgo parking permits.

Jeremy Hogan, Stewart Moon, Steve Snyder | Herald-Times map and photo illustration
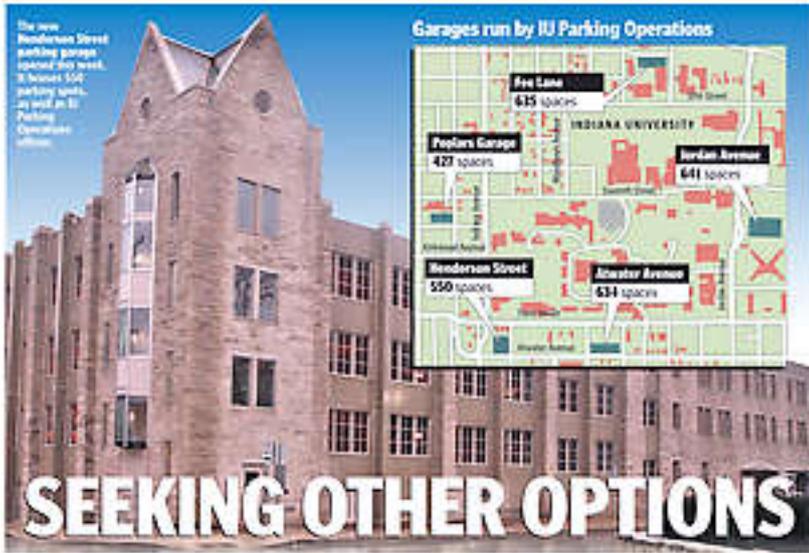
Robert Atkins, a painter with Local 47 in Indianapolis, carries a scaffold Thursday from a stairway atop IU's new parking garage that opened this week at Henderson and Atwater. Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times

Work is nearly complete at IU's new parking garage at Henderson Street and Atwater Avenue. Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times