City of Columbus, Ohio

Embracing smart parking technology to run asset light

Background

The City of Columbus is the state capital of Ohio, a bustling metropolis with a rich history and home to a diverse range of businesses. The city has a population of nearly a million people, making it one of the most populous cities in the Midwest – second only to Chicago. In addition to being an important travel hub, Columbus' many unique neighborhoods make it a vibrant spot for events, festivals, outdoor activities, and more.

Columbus manages over 20,000 on-street paid parking spaces and an additional 4,600 off-street spaces across nine different facilities. In addition to parking, the city also boasts convenient access to numerous bike and walking paths, as well as public transit. In 2016, the city was the first-ever winner of the US Department of Transportation's Smart City Challenge. The 40 million dollar grant was part of Columbus' radical initiative to update and modernize transportation, using smart mobility to enrich people's lives.

In 2019, the city, together with an outside consulting firm, created a strategic parking plan to modernize the management of on-street parking. "The most impactful recommendation we received was to take an asset-light approach to reduce costs and address the aging infrastructure on the street," explains Amanda Ford, the On-Street Parking Policies and Strategies Manager for the City of Columbus.

Creating a quick and customer-friendly implementation

Instead of making wholesale changes, the Smart Columbus team rolled out new features incrementally. In 2019, the City of Columbus partnered with ParkMobile to offer digital parking to their residents, a popular move that was the first part of the city's plans for an ambitious asset-light transition.

With the majority of Columbus' single space 2G meters being decommissioned in 2022, the city had to quickly create a detailed action plan. Within a two-and-a-half-week period, Ford and her team installed roughly 150 kiosks and removed over 3,000 single space meters. This change was supported by the addition of thousands of regulatory and pay-to-park signs.

THE CITY OF
COLUMBUS

Columbus, OH by the numbers

20,000
Managed on-street spaces

270,000
In-app parking transactions monthly

1 million
Total app users

88%
App adoption

The transition has been extremely popular with residents and visitors, and mobile payments now make up 88% of all parking transactions. The city's novel approach has also significantly reduced friction for customers while enabling streamlined enforcement, flexible policy creation, and more.

Columbus also created several mobile pay only areas, primarily in residential permit areas where installing a kiosk was impractical. Ford explains that taking a phased approach has given them valuable lessons to apply in future mobile-only implementations.

Laying the foundation for a successful transformation

As expected, such major changes came with some growing pains. To ease the transition, Columbus hired a marketing firm to develop an aggressive communication strategy that ensured residents understood exactly how the new parking system would work. "We had a limited amount of time to make this transition, so the marketing firm was a critical component. They focused on effective messaging that made parking fun while the Parking Services team concentrated on the implementation," Ford notes.

Awareness was also a key priority since without meter heads many residents might simply assume parking was now free. So, Ford and ParkMobile quickly went to work creating clear signage. "ParkMobile has been a great partner from day one and helped us improve the ParkColumbus signage to be more informative and cut down on confusion by reducing the number of mobile pay zones," Ford recalls.

Radio ads, billboards, meter post signage, and informational cards placed on vehicles were all used to support the upcoming asset-light transition. However, the most successful approach was the award-winning My Buddy Charles parking series. This fun, yet informative, video series provided education on understanding the new signage and all the ways to pay for parking.

> "Taking an asset-light approach and encouraging use of the app has significantly changed parking in the City of Columbus. We've seen amazing growth with ParkMobile and most people love paying by the app."
>
> **Amanda Ford**
> On-Street Parking Policies and Strategies Manager, City of Columbus

Leveraging technology to move forward

Columbus' parking operations continue to grow, with the city closely monitoring data to make effective changes. Enforcement remains a top priority for a successful parking program, with the enforcement team going to a 24-hour operation this summer. They are also looking to digital partners to implement new ways to manage loading zones for fleets and delivery services. "The city is really pushing for mobility right now to find how to take full advantage of the curb we have and manage it for its highest and best use," explains Justin Goodwin, Mobility and Parking Administrator at the City of Columbus.

Equity and inclusion are also top of mind, especially surrounding ADA spaces and the unbanked community. Ford explains the importance of adapting as people's needs change, with her team opting to leave single space meters in certain areas or even reinstall kiosks that had previously been removed. Multiple payment options were equally crucial to easing their digital transition, and the city offers options like pay-to-text and IVR payments for people who don't have a smartphone.

In the end, a digital-forward, asset-light implementation has been great for both the city's residents and its landscape. "The best part of the implementation was driving down the street and immediately seeing the amount of clutter reduced on our sidewalks and streets. One day you drove down the street and saw a row of meters, the next day they were gone. It was such an amazing transformation," Ford says.