

Downtown Saugatuck Employee Parking Narrative

Purpose and Context

Downtown Saugatuck's parking challenge is not simply a question of whether enough parking exists; it is a question of whether the most convenient parking spaces are used in ways that support downtown businesses, customers, employees, and the broader visitor experience. The employee parking data show that most employees currently park wherever they can find a space, including side streets, Butler Street, Water Street, church lots, private lots, the hill, and occasionally the High School lot. Several businesses already encourage employees not to park directly in front of storefronts, but practices vary widely, and there is no consistently communicated downtown-wide approach.

The result is a system that relies on informal habits, individual business practices, and employee choice. During peak summer periods, that informal system can place employees in the same high-demand spaces that customers need for short visits, shopping, dining, pickups, appointments, and waterfront activities. Downtown Saugatuck would benefit from a coordinated employee parking plan that makes it easier, safer, and more attractive for employees to park remotely while keeping the most convenient spaces available for customer turnover.

Peak-Season Employee Parking Planning Estimate

For planning purposes, Downtown Saugatuck likely has on the order of 400 to 600 employees working during peak summer periods. That estimate is not a documented employment census; rather, it is an order-of-magnitude planning assumption based on the mix of downtown land uses, including approximately 40 to 60 retail shops, 20 to 30 restaurants, bars, and cafes, several lodging properties, marinas, boat rentals, and other tourism-related operators.

Using typical seasonal staffing levels, a busy summer Saturday could reasonably include approximately 500 employees working in or near the downtown core. If 70 to 80 percent of those employees arrive by car, employee parking demand could be on the order of 350 to 400 parked vehicles during peak periods. Stated another way, employee parking may consume roughly one-fifth to one-quarter of the community's total parking supply during the periods when customer demand is also highest.

This estimate should be communicated carefully as a planning-level benchmark rather than a sourced count. Even so, it is useful because it illustrates the scale of the issue: employee parking is large enough to materially affect customer access, but also manageable enough that a voluntary, well-communicated employee parking plan could meaningfully improve the downtown parking experience without requiring major new construction as the first response.

The Implications of Not Enforcing Three-Hour Time Limits

The posted three-hour limits are intended to encourage turnover in the spaces closest to downtown businesses. When those limits are not enforced, they become advisory rather than operational. Long-duration parkers, including employees, can occupy customer-oriented spaces for an entire shift, reducing the availability of convenient parking for the very customers those spaces are intended to serve.

Without consistent enforcement, the downtown parking supply appears more constrained than it may actually be. A single employee vehicle parked in a prime space for six to eight hours may displace multiple customer visits over the same period. In a retail and hospitality environment, the lost turnover can translate into fewer walk-in customers, missed reservations or scheduled activities, lower impulse spending, and frustration that discourages repeat visits. The data include examples of customers struggling to find parking and even missing scheduled activities due to unavailable parking. This reinforces the importance of preserving convenient spaces for short-duration customer use.

Enforcement should therefore be understood less as punishment and more as a management tool. The objective is not to penalize employees or visitors; it is to make the posted time limits meaningful, support turnover, and create predictable access for customers. A thoughtful employee parking plan can reduce the need for punitive enforcement by providing employees with a practical alternative before enforcement becomes the primary means of changing behavior.

Employees in Customer Spaces: Business and Customer-Service Impacts

When employees park in the most convenient spaces, they unintentionally compete with customers for the front-door access that helps downtown businesses succeed. This is especially important in a seasonal downtown where visitors may be unfamiliar with local parking options, be traveling with children, have limited mobility, or make a quick stop. Convenient parking is part of the customer experience. When it is unavailable, the trip begins with friction rather than welcome.

For business owners, this is a direct economic issue. The most visible and convenient spaces should generate customer access and sales throughout the day. If those spaces are occupied by employee vehicles for full shifts, they are not serving their highest-value function. Based on the planning estimate above, employee vehicles could represent a substantial share of the total parking supply on a peak summer day. Preserving nearby spaces for customers supports sales, customer satisfaction, and repeat visitation. It also helps reinforce the perception that downtown Saugatuck is accessible, welcoming, and easy to patronize during its busiest periods.

An employee parking plan should recognize legitimate employee needs, including loading and unloading, late-night safety, mobility limitations, weather, post-shift fatigue, and the practicality of reaching remote lots. However, those needs should be addressed through program design rather than by allowing the most convenient customer spaces to function as default employee parking. The most effective approach is to make the preferred behavior easy, safe, communicated, and worthwhile.

The Case for a Voluntary Employee Parking Plan

The recommended strategy is not a mandate. It is a coordinated plan that invites employees and business owners to participate because the benefits are clear. A voluntary employee parking plan can protect customer access while respecting the operational realities of downtown businesses. Its success depends on education, convenience, regular communication, and a shared understanding that the program is good for business.

The core message should be simple: when employees park slightly farther away or use remote parking, the most convenient spaces remain available for customers. Customers are more likely to stop, shop, dine, return, and recommend downtown Saugatuck when access is easy. Every employee who chooses a remote space helps create additional opportunities for customer visits throughout the day. This is a practical way for employees to support their own workplace, their employer, and the downtown economy.

Business owners also benefit from a plan that establishes consistent expectations across downtown. Without a common approach, responsible businesses that ask employees to park remotely may feel disadvantaged if neighboring employees continue to occupy prime spaces. A downtown-wide plan creates a shared standard, reduces confusion, and reinforces the idea that customer access is a collective business priority.

A rising tide lifts all boats, and the success of an employee parking plan depends on visible support from downtown leadership, including city administration, business owners, and managers. Employees are more likely to embrace remote parking when they see leaders consistently reinforce the same message and model the behavior they ask others to follow. Walking the talk is important: if managers, owners, and civic leaders treat customer access as a shared priority, the program becomes less about individual inconvenience and more about collective downtown success.

The plan also advances two important collective goals: avoiding reliance on an expensive parking structure that would be costly to build and still unable to solve every parking-related problem, and maintaining free public parking access as a defining part of the downtown experience. Surveys have shown significant resistance to both major new parking construction and paid parking. A well-supported employee parking plan could go a long way toward reducing pressure on these less desirable solutions by making better use of the existing parking supply and preserving convenient public spaces for customers.

Addressing Real and Perceived Obstacles

The employee feedback identifies several perceived and real barriers to remote parking: lack of awareness, uncertainty about where employees are allowed to park, concerns about shuttle wait times, poor lighting, late-night safety, sidewalk conditions, weather, loading and unloading needs, and the feeling that remote parking adds time to a shift. Some of these concerns are real and must be addressed directly, particularly late-night safety, lighting, shuttle hours, and mobility limitations. Others are likely to be perceived or solved through better information, clearer signage, incentives, and consistent employer communication.

A successful plan should remove both real and perceived obstacles. If employees are unsure where to park, provide a clear map. If the shuttle is underused because employees do not know about it, promote it consistently through employers, signs, onboarding materials, and seasonal reminders. If employees believe remote parking always takes too long, publish realistic walking times, identify the closest remote options by business area, and consider incentives for participation. If late-night safety is a barrier, focus remote-parking expectations on

daytime and early-evening shifts first while separately improving lighting, shuttle span, and safe walking routes for late-night workers.

The plan should be flexible enough to recognize exceptions. Loading and unloading, employees with mobility limitations, very late shifts, young employees, and employees carrying cash may require different arrangements. Flexibility will make the program more credible. The goal is not to eliminate every employee vehicle from downtown; it is to reduce avoidable long-duration use of the most convenient spaces and build a culture in which remote employee parking is the normal, preferred practice when feasible.

Identifying specific employee parking locations is also important because it helps convert parking from a daily search into a regular peak-season habit. When employees know where they are expected and encouraged to park, they can go directly to those locations rather than circulating through downtown as motorists searching for available spaces. Reducing that cruising activity helps keep the street grid moving, lowers congestion near the most active customer areas, and makes the downtown experience feel less clogged during peak periods. In practical terms, the time an employee might otherwise spend driving block to block in search of parking can be replaced with more predictable walking, shuttle, biking, or riding time between a remote parking location and the workplace destination.

Recommended Program Elements

- **Designate preferred employee parking areas.** Identify remote or peripheral lots that can reliably accommodate employee parking during peak periods, potentially including shared, seasonal, or pass-based arrangements.
- **Develop a simple employee parking map.** Show recommended lots, walking routes, shuttle stops, bike parking, and estimated walking times to major downtown blocks.
- **Improve communication with employers.** Provide business owners with a seasonal toolkit they can share during hiring, onboarding, staff meetings, and pre-shift reminders.
- **Promote customer-access message.** Emphasize that remote employee parking helps customers reach businesses, supports sales, and improves the downtown experience.
- **Pair expectations with incentives.** Consider raffles, recognition, employee passes, merchant participation goals, or other positive reinforcement for employees who use recommended parking areas.
- **Address safety and convenience.** Improve lighting, signage, shuttle information, sidewalk conditions, and late-night transportation options where barriers are real.
- **Use enforcement strategically.** Enforce posted time limits in customer-oriented areas consistently, while communicating that enforcement supports turnover and customer access rather than punishment.
- **Monitor and refine the program.** Review participation, customer feedback, business feedback, and peak-season conditions to adjust the program over time.

Communication Strategy

Communication should be regular, positive, and repeated throughout the season. A single sign or one-time announcement will not change parking habits. The program should be introduced before peak season, reinforced during employee onboarding, reminded at the start of busy weekends, and supported with simple materials that business owners can easily distribute. Messaging should avoid blame and focus on shared benefits: convenient customer parking is good for business, customer satisfaction, and the long-term vitality of downtown Saugatuck.

The tone matters. Employees should not be told they are the problem. They should be shown how their parking choices can be part of the solution. Business owners should not be asked to enforce a vague concept; they should be given clear tools, consistent expectations, and a compelling business rationale. The most persuasive message is that every convenient space preserved for customers can serve multiple customer visits, strengthen sales opportunities, and encourage visitors to return. Yes, public parking is public, and the city does not want to get into the business of managing private businesses' employees. However, in the absence of an employee parking plan and an ongoing and regular communications strategy, many employees will compete with customers for parking.

Conclusion

Downtown Saugatuck's employee parking challenge can be addressed most effectively through a coordinated, voluntary plan that aligns employee convenience with customer access. Planning-level estimates suggest that peak-season employee vehicles could consume roughly one-fifth to one-quarter of the community's parking supply, making employee parking behavior a meaningful factor in customer access and downtown turnover. Enforcing posted three-hour limits, encouraging employees to use remote or peripheral parking, improving communication, and removing real and perceived obstacles will help the downtown parking system function more efficiently. This approach does not require treating employees as the problem or imposing a rigid mandate. Instead, it creates a shared program that helps employees, business owners, customers, and the downtown district succeed together.