



Downtown Sylva Parking Study

Prepared for Downtown Sylva Association and the Town of Sylva



By Thaddeus N. Huff

Capstone Experience

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Introduction

Downtown parking, although not at the top of the agenda for most cities, seems to be an issue with every municipality, large and small, throughout the country. Issues regarding parking policy that proliferate include how to pay for parking, supply of available spaces, and enforcement of parking rules. Most retail owners view adequate parking as an enhancement to their bottom-line, professing that close access to their business is a key to customer development. On the other hand, the last three decades have brought an abundance of surface lots to downtown in order to increase supply. Most experts say it has come at the expense of visual appeal and a pedestrian-friendly downtown.

The Town of Sylva is like most small communities in that it seeks a vibrant downtown because indicators show that an active downtown means better economic, social, and even environmental outcomes for the entire community. The Downtown Sylva Association (DSA) was created in 2004 as a part of North Carolina's Main Street Program. Made up of business owners and public officials, their charge is to encourage economic development while preserving the historic and cultural nature of downtown.¹

Increasingly over the last several years, members have voiced concerns about the inadequate supply of parking downtown and how it has been detrimental to their business. A November 2004 informal study conducted by Dr. Gibbs Knotts of Western Carolina University revealed that more than one in four citizens mentioned as suggestions to "improve downtown", something related to parking. In the same survey, 72% rated the issue of parking as "very important", while 23% responded "somewhat important".² Considering that 179 residents responded to the question, that is quite a telling result.

The goal of this study is to examine the parking situation downtown by reviewing the different elements involved, conducting a supply and demand audit, and by surveying the DSA members further to assess ideas for improvement. Using this information, some recommendations will be formulated to provide a foundation for possible future action by the Town of Sylva and The DSA.

¹ Downtown Sylva Website, <http://www.downtownsylva.org/about-us/>, 2008

² DSA Survey, November 2009, Knotts, Gibbs. Western Carolina University.

Study Design/Methods

The study consists of three distinct parts designed to provide some empirical research with a review of best practices and examination of ancillary issues. Two field studies, the physical counts demonstration and parking survey, provide a means for examining the perception versus the reality in numerical terms. Both were conducted in March of 2010.

DSA Member Survey

The survey was conducted on-line and sent to 51 members of the DSA, including business owners in retail, professional services, hospitality, and government. 31 responses, (61%) indicated a significant sample response. Five basic questions were asked with a “yes” or “no” option as well as an opportunity to provide open-ended responses. One question was completely open-ended, and one closed. The open-ended data was then grouped into similar categories, if appropriate, to show some possible consistencies amongst concerns. The questions dealt with adequacy of parking for patrons and employees, safety, signage, and disabled parking. (See Appendix for survey)

Physical Counts Demonstration

The first step in demonstrating supply versus demand is to define the study area in detail. Eight square blocks, three streets running north-south and five cross streets running east-west, make up the downtown area. Each block was assigned a number (sector), and the number of spaces in each block was counted. Connected to these eight blocks are several critical off-street, surface lots that play an important role in the parking plan. Both private and public, these areas considerably add to the total supply downtown and therefore were included in the study. Figure 1 shows the parking inventory downtown for this study. (Count-sheet maps are included in the Appendix)

Fig. 1

Type	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Totals
On-Street	11	6	30	26	32	24	28	51	208
Off-Street Public	17	0	22	47	23	0	22	0	131
Off-Street-Private	15	64	32	0	81	18	25	27	262
Total Supply	43	70	84	73	136	42	75	78	601
Disabled	4	4	2	1	3	2	3	2	21

Four types of parking spaces are available downtown: on-street (curbside), off-street-public (surface lots), off-street-private (surface lots), and disabled designated (both on and off-street). On-street is generally viewed as the most desirable in downtown by community planners and public officials because of easy access, visual appeal, and their pedestrian friendliness. Thus, many downtowns have tried to create as much on-street parking as possible. The number of on-street spaces in downtown is 208, or just over one-third of the total supply (601). Off-street public lots are either in areas designated by the town for public use or used informally by the public. These include some of connected lots such as the Bridge Park area and Farmer's Market. Finally, the largest supplier is off-street private, which provides 262 spaces. These are owned by private business, and as such, usually require patronage or employment to park there.

To determine point-in-time demand data, four physical counts were conducted over a three week period to show usage rates. Weekday times of 9:30am, 12:30pm, 5:45pm, and 5:30pm (on a Friday) were included to produce an average demand and show peak times for different sectors and types of parking. A minimum of two surveyors walked the streets and counted the spaces used.

Results

DSA Member Survey

31 of 52 members answered all or part of the survey. The results generally reinforced the concerns of the previous survey and contained some interesting ideas and responses. The following is summary of the themes that developed in the survey. The survey summary results in full can be accessed in the Appendix.

Merchant Parking

Having anecdotal evidence that parking by staff in prime locations was a major issue, questions were asked about adequate parking for employees and patrons. 65% (20) of respondents answered "no" to the question of whether there was adequate parking for patrons, while the same number (20) responded that there *was* adequate parking downtown for employees. In recent years, parking for employees was developed at The Bridge Park as well as at the Farmer's Market and close-by

churches, according to many business owners. Yet, six noted that other merchants park on-street and another six mentioned that the open lots were not being used enough. Other comments included, “that people will not walk even a few blocks”, “people park too long”, and that some had lost customers who “give up and go somewhere else”. When asked if they and/or staff parked downtown during the day, 84% (26) responded “yes”, but only two admitted to parking on-street.

Safety and Convenience

77% (24) of the respondents stated that it was safe to park and get around downtown, yet ten (24%) commented on safety issues. Seven comments were directed towards the need for better crosswalks, six mentioned speed of cars as an issue, particularly on Mill and Main Streets, and several noted the lack of adequate lighting as a concern. Clearly the issue has to do with how automobiles circulate downtown, and parking is part of the issue. With on-street parking comes potentially more cars in the areas where pedestrians circulate. With the one-way nature of the town major arteries, Main and Mill, the issue is an important one, and should be considered in all future downtown planning.

Signage/Education

69% (20) thought that signage and education about parking was inadequate. There were many positive ideas offered on how to educate workers, tourists, and patrons on appropriate places to park downtown. The consensus was that more signs need to be added and a clear distinction between employee and patron-parking needs to be made.

Ideas/General Comments

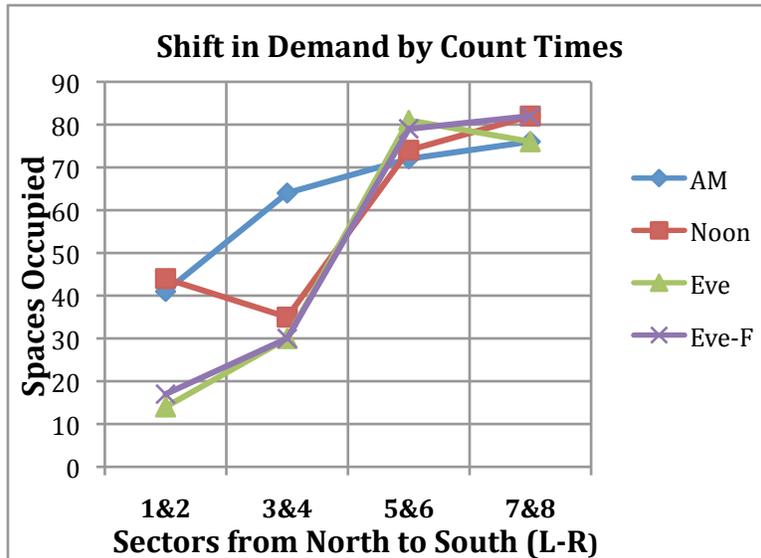
25 (81%) respondents offered ideas and general comments about parking downtown. While employee parking was often mentioned again, a plurality stated that more needed to be done through law enforcement and rule-making. The idea of meters was brought up, as well as restrictions to one, two, and four-hour parking in certain areas. Several mentioned the need for designated patrols by the law enforcement, while others stated that the town in general should be more involved in developing parking options. The responses somewhat flew in the face of conventional thinking about downtown parking philosophies; which is to offer as much free parking as possible. Cutting edge parking managers would suggest however there always needs to be a way to pay for the prime real estate that parking takes up downtown.

Physical Counts Demonstration

Land Uses

As originally hypothesized, demand towards the south end increased as the counts were later in the day. Sectors 1&2 represent the area farthest north (towards Dillsboro). As figure 2 shows, in the morning and around noon, they peak (41 and 44 cars respectively). In the evening counts, the occupancy is less than half of the other two (13 & 17). This is most likely due to the nature of business in the area, having less retail, but instead a public library and professional offices. Sectors 3&4 show a similar pattern, with occupied spaces in the evening less than half (30) of the morning number (65). Sectors 5&6 and 7&8 remain consistently busy with occupancy at higher levels, near or above 50% for all four counts. However, the evening counts have a particularly low concentration on the north end, supporting the theory that the most highly trafficked areas are the retail businesses on the south end.

Fig.2

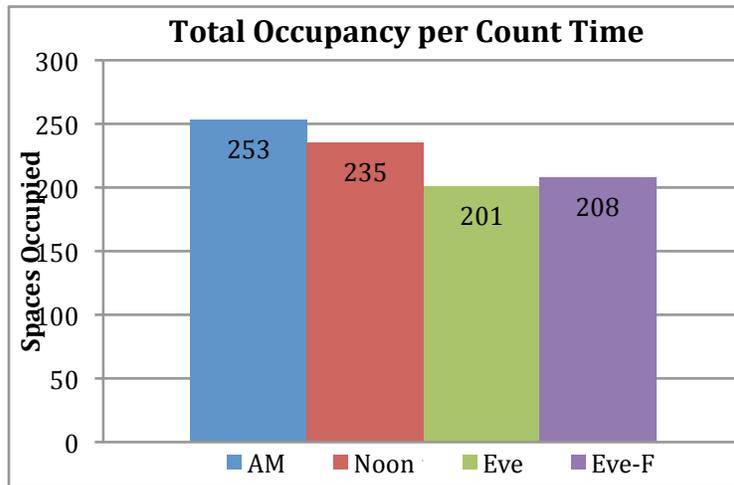


Time of Day

An interesting hypothesis that was refuted is that the peak time (the count with the most cars) would be in the evening on a Friday rather than a weekday morning or afternoon. Figure 3 below shows that the 9:30am had the highest occupancy with 253 out of 601 spaces filled, or 42% “saturation”.

The Noontime count follows with 235 (39%), then Friday evening (208) and weekday evening at 201 (33%). Although some of the highest occupancy rates occurred for on-street parking on the south side on Friday evening, it was outweighed by the number of employees whose business operations closed at 5:00pm.

Fig. 3



Location

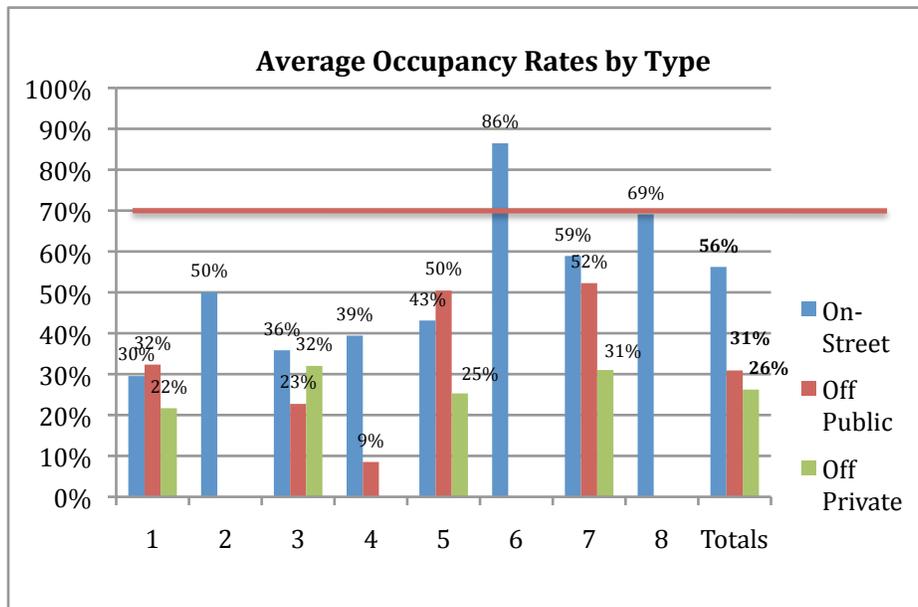
As far as use by sector, there were some differences of note. As mentioned earlier, sectors 1&2 showed a steep decline in the evenings, bringing their averages down. The library, motel, and funeral home account for 61 of the 113 available spaces, yet were sporadically used. Their highest occupancy rate was at 12:30pm, at 49%. Sectors 3&4 also have large off-street lots that are seldom used, including the Bridge Park lot, the First Baptist lot, and Landis Street lot. The low usage bloats the supply at the expense of an accurate occupancy rate. The highest rate was also at 12:30pm, a mere 26% occupancy. Sectors 5&6 showed a much higher occupancy rate average overall and it was consistent over the different time periods, with a relative low range of 8. While sector 5 raised no real concerns, sector 6 showed 2 instances where occupancy could be considered in the “danger zone” of 70% or above. Both 5:30pm on Friday (74%), and 12:30pm (76%) showed that because of the high numbers of on-street parking on Main Street (20 spots), the occupancy rate can be an issue. Sectors 7&8 showed the same patterns as sectors 5&6 as far as consistency. Sector 7 had a maximum occupancy rate of 62% at 9:30am, while sector 8 maxed out at 74% on 5:30pm on Friday. Neither is considered in the danger zone. However, the fact that there are 74 public and

private off-street spaces (out of 153) raises the question if the off-street spaces are being utilized appropriately. One time when an off-street lot *was* used appropriately was during the am count, when 20 of 22 spaces (91%) were occupied in the small public lot (referred to as the employee lot). Considering the spaces in the lot were only at 39% capacity on average during the other counts, this is one of the best examples of parking management the way it is supposed to be.

Types of Parking

Going in, it was estimated that on-street parking would be the most highly used. This was a correct assumption because the average usage of on-street parking dwarfed the other two types. On-street spaces were filled 56% of the time compared with off-street public (31%) and off-street private (26%). Even though the overall occupancy rate was only 56%, the usage rates were 86% in sector 6 and 69% in sector 8. Perhaps this is a good thing, because some parking managers feel that having a high occupancy rate in prime, on-street areas is good for business. However, the lower average comes from considerably less use on Jackson and Mill Streets, a problem occurring in every sector.

Fig.. 4



The public, off-street spaces seemed to be a mixed-bag. On one hand, the use of the connected lot west of Main Street for employees mentioned in the previous section, is a good sign. However, the

low occupancy rate of new park bridge lot (4 out of 160) is abysmal. The same could be said for the Farmer's Market lot (10 out of 44), and much of the church parking considered public. The average rate of 31% could be improved upon, largely by behavior change and better signage.

Finally, considering the off-street surface lots as part of the overall supply was a mistake. Even though it gives a better picture of the overall capacity of the area, it inflates the overall supply and deflates the occupancy rate overall. If demand reaches a critical juncture in the future, it is helpful to know that some spaces could be negotiated over to the public. However, the motel lots, the funeral lot, spaces east of Mill Street, and the Sylva Herald private spaces should not be considered in future counts.

In the broader sense, the perception that there is inadequate parking downtown was not the reality according to the occupancy data. Even if the private lots were taken out of the equation, the occupancy thresholds would still not peak into the danger zone in most situations. The total number of cars parked in the area at one time peaked at 179, not considering the private lots. When compared to the total number of spaces available (339) the occupancy average is 53%, a healthy but not overly concerning statistic.

Disabled Parking

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines for parking, for every 25 spaces, one (4%) must be designated for disabled use. This generally means that it is wide enough for a wheelchair to get out comfortably and that it be marked and closest to the most highly frequented destinations.³ When the number of spaces goes from 500-1000, this requirement is 2%. So even though this requirement should be applied to every lot, if you consider the total number of spaces in downtown and apply the same formula, the code would require 13 disabled spaces in downtown (when rounding up). Fortunately, 21 spaces are provided. An indicator that there may be an issue with demand is the occupancy rate. Remarkably, on average only 12% of the available spaces were used during the count periods. Even if there is not a concern in this area now, careful attention should be paid in developing future plans.

³ ADA Accessibility Guidelines, US Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Section 4.6, September 2005

Recommendations

Given that the supply, in this case, is not the problem, the issue seems to be the proximity to certain locations in downtown for drivers. The answer is not more parking spaces. Even with no access to private lots, an argument could be made there is plenty of parking to meet the demand given the time periods the counts were conducted in. The issues are connected to downtown in a larger sense.

1) *Evaluate the policies and codes of the Town of Sylva regarding parking.* When reviewing the policies on-line, an up-to-date set of standards was noticeably absent. The municipal code mentioned parking meters at greatest length, even though no meters are to be found downtown anymore. While regulation in many cases is not the answer, direction from The Town might be helpful in determining long-term strategies and could make enforcement programs easier.

2) *Enforce the employee/merchant parking off-street policy.* In reality, there was no way to gauge this issue using the techniques employed for this study. However, with enough members responding to the survey showing that this is a real issue, something needs to be done. Ride share programs in Sylva most likely would not reach scale needed to be effective, nor would incentives to take public transportation to work. But, some sort of incentive for employees to park off-street is essential. If this does not work, a pact amongst DSA members could be deployed. Parking on-street for “short stops” and for loading needs to be examined further as well, especially if trips are the two to three hour variety.\

3) *Provide more signage for public parking off-street, especially off of Mill.* Considering resources are an issue, this is the only area recommended to invest heavily in the short-term. “If visitors to downtown are not willing to walk a few blocks to their destinations, they are not familiar with what a decent downtown should be”, a city manager noted in a similar downtown study.⁴ A campaign for “parking once” could be coordinated for all people downtown, as long as the spaces chosen to park on are not on-street.

4) *Make the trip from Bridge Park and Farmer’s Market more attractive.* Using a variety of methods could accomplish this feat. Having safe crosswalks and more traffic calming mechanisms

⁴ “The High Cost of Free Parking”, Shoup, Donald. 2005

should be a public safety goal, and the area near the train tracks should be priority-one. Maybe vendors on the routes to Main Street could offer discounts to employees who park at the off-street lots for morning coffee, etc. In the long-term, the Mill Street area should be viewed as a re-developmental necessity to enhance the safety and beauty of downtown. A new traffic light could also be utilized.

5) Connect these recommendations and all downtown decisions with the upcoming Pedestrian Plan being conducted by The Berger Group. It cannot be overstated how important pedestrian circulation is to a downtown's vitality. Ensuring that downtown is a priority in pedestrian planning is essential because the more automobiles driving downtown, the more spaces needed for parking, and at a greater cost to the taxpayers.

6) Conduct additional utilization counts during perceived peak times. A major strength of the DSA is the vibrant community offerings it is tasked with running and the tourism that brings visitors in during the summer months. Future studies could focus on Saturday and parking during festivals and in the summer to evaluate parking during peak periods. This is also the perfect time to test out some of the recommendations mentioned above, including new signage, use of incentives, etc.

Although this is not an exhaustive list of actions that could be taken, it offers the least intrusive and controversial options to makeover parking in the short-term. Other options such as having users pay for parking (meters, permits, etc.), regulated use areas (such as 1 hour spots), or urging law enforcement to conduct routine checks may be suitable for the future. However, these actions cost money and require governmental action that could take time and considerable will. With the right mix of education and common sense participation by DSA members, hopefully most of the issues can be tackled without governmental intervention.

Appendix

I. Resources Consulted for this study

Garrick, Norman, PhD. “Parking at Mixed-Use Centers in Small Cities”, March 2006.

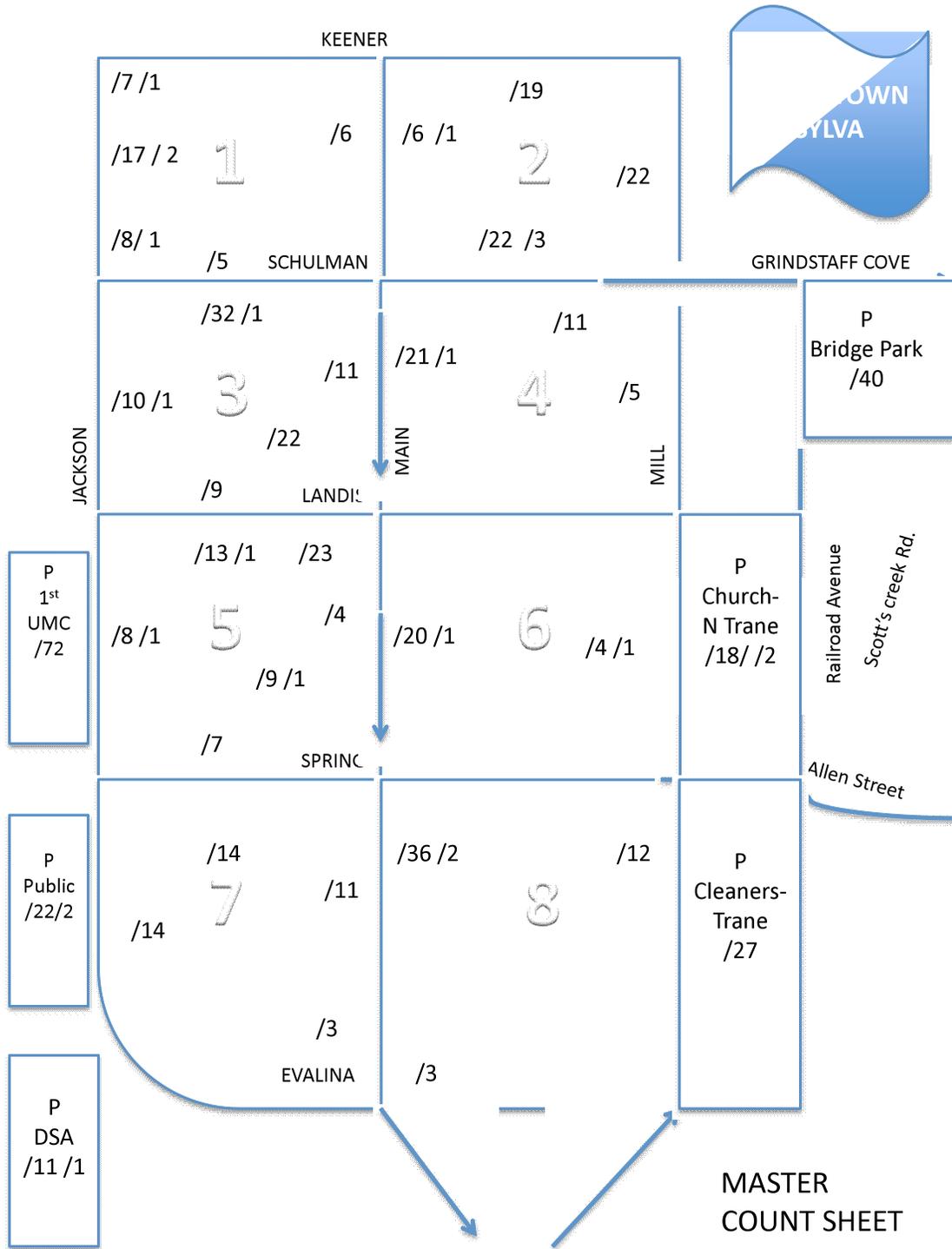
Landsman, Carol, Nelson/Nygaard Consulting Associates. “Parking Management Made Easy: A Guide to Taming the Downtown Parking Beast, June 2001.

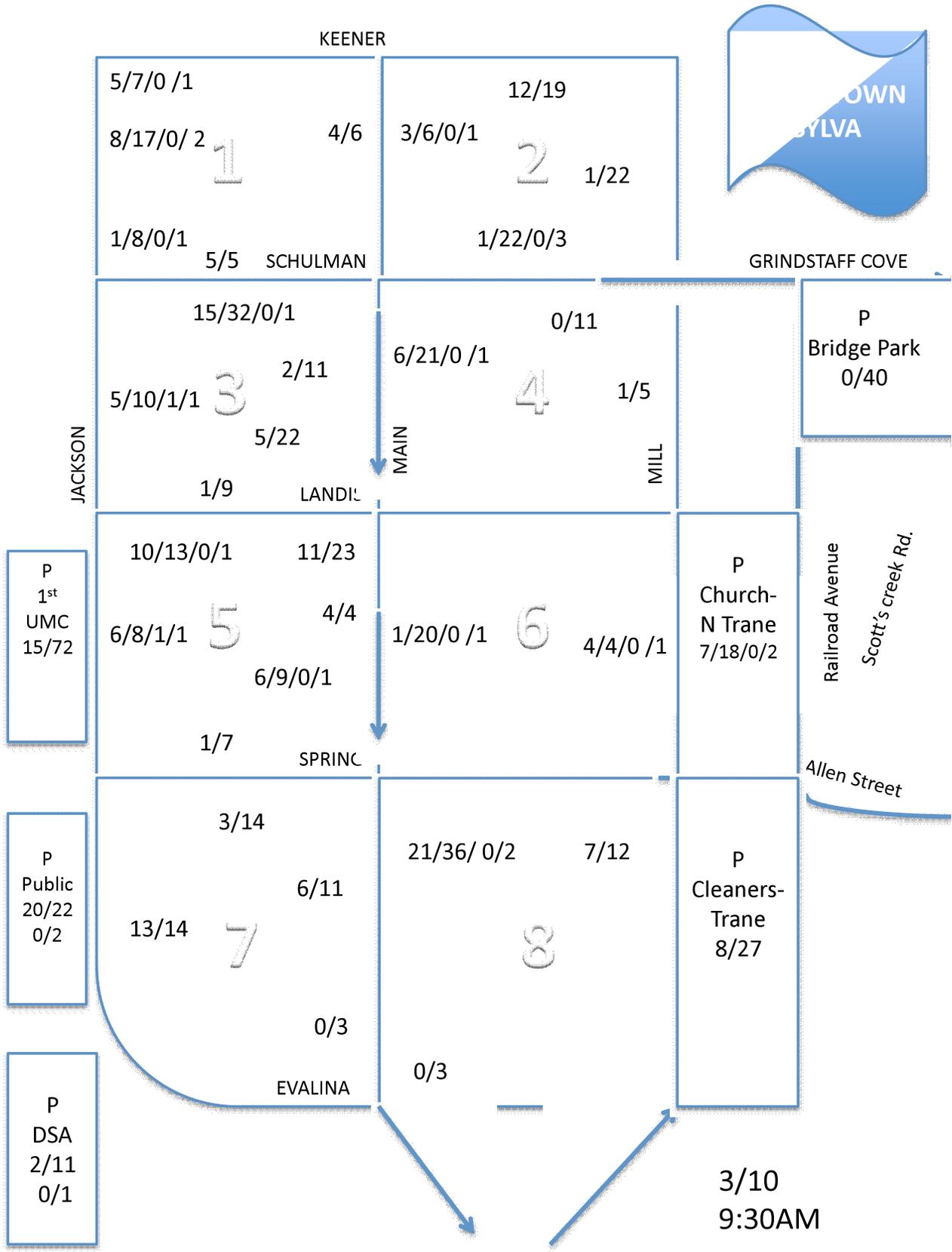
Online TDM Encyclopedia, “Shared Parking Facilities”, <http://vtpi.org/tdm/>

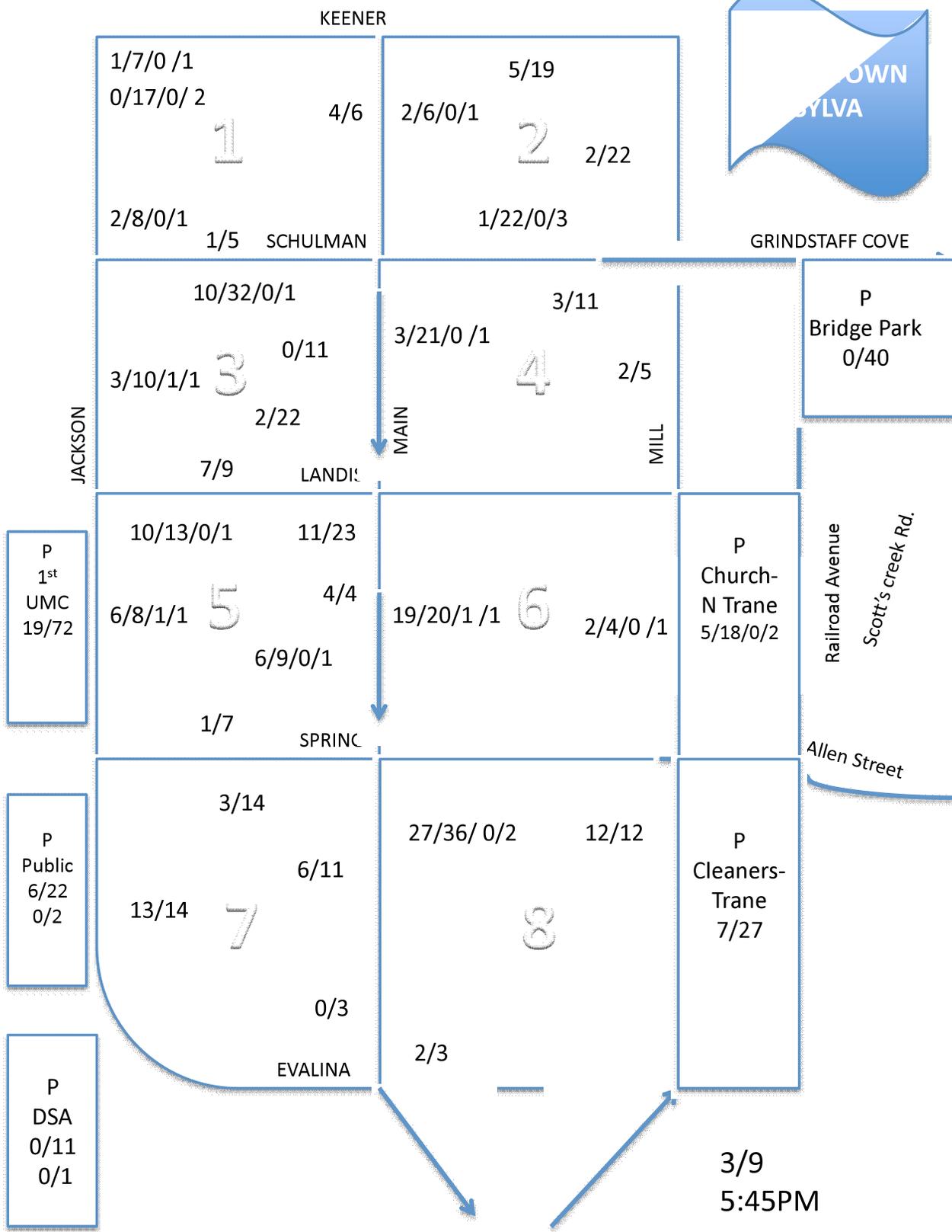
Transit Cooperative Research Program, Report 95, Chapter 18, “Parking Management and Supply”, 2003

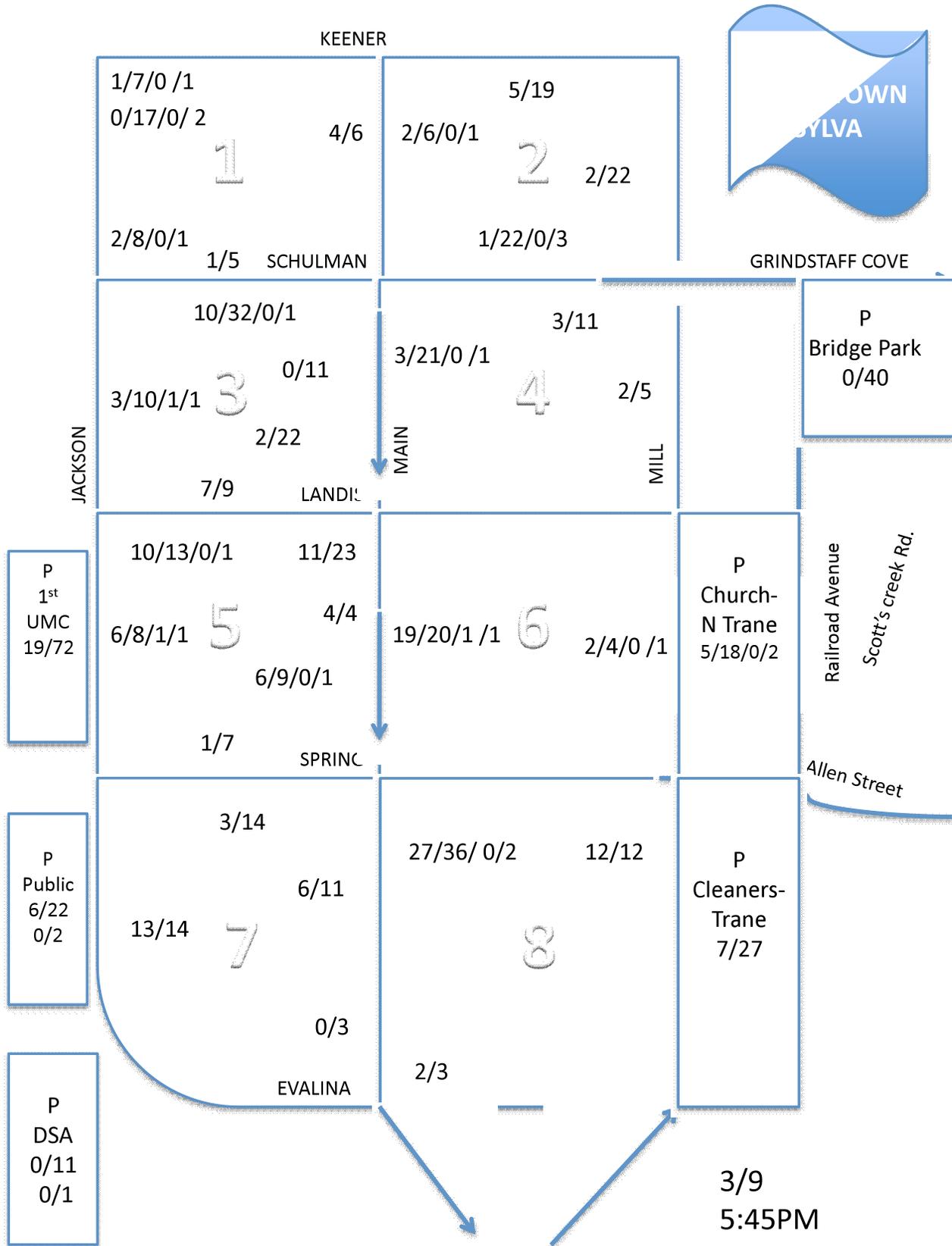
US Environmental Protection Agency, “Parking Spaces/Community Places”, January 2006

II. Count Sheets









III. Occupancy Count Data

Totals by Sector (Average)

Type	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Totals
On-Street	30%	50%	36%	39%	43%	86%	59%	69%	56%
Off Public	32%	0%	23%	9%	50%	0%	52%	0%	31%
Off Private	22%	0%	32%	0%	25%	0%	31%	0%	26%
Totals	28%	21%	31%	20%	35%	66%	48%	56%	38%

