

Smoother Trip in BWI Garage; Airport 'Smart Park' System Directs Drivers to Open Spaces:[FINAL Edition]

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Outside the main terminal at Baltimore-Washington International Airport, the daily jostle for parking spaces was in full swing on Level 6, where anxious motorists stalked travelers walking back to their cars or raced other drivers to claim the next open spot.

Four floors below, the parking scene was markedly different. Guided by green and red lights strung along rows of spaces, motorists could quickly locate open spaces and fill them, and vehicle traffic moved smoothly through the garage.

Behold the first "Smart Park" system to be installed in an airport in this country, unveiled yesterday by Maryland officials at the kickoff of a \$1.8 billion expansion of the airport terminal and parking garages.

Maryland Aviation Administration officials have long been aware of the growing pressure that increasing numbers of travelers are putting on the parking garages at BWI, one of the nation's fastest-growing airports. But it was Secretary of Transportation John D. Porcari who tripped upon a potential solution.

On a visit to downtown Dublin, Porcari was entranced by a network of signs that directed motorists to parking lots in the downtown area where spaces were available.

"I took pictures, brought them back, showed them to the governor and lieutenant governor, who, it turns out, had heard of this," said Porcari. "They just said, 'Do it.' "

The result has been on display for several weeks on Level 2 of the main parking garage at BWI -- a \$600,000 network of sensors and lights in 1,000 spaces that officials hope to extend to the rest of the 4,600 public spaces in the garage over the next several years.

The technology is expensive -- about \$450 a space -- and will cost \$1.8 million just for the existing garage, even more for the new 7,000-space behemoth that will be erected on land now occupied by the state Department of Transportation offices.

But state officials say the new technology will provide more revenue and greater efficiency by allowing them to keep the garage open until it is virtually filled, instead of closing when it is just about 80 percent full because they don't know exactly how many spaces remain open.

And, they said, it will help the airport maintain its reputation and customer base.

"Normally it's hellacious trying to find a parking spot here," said Marie Burgett, a nurse from Crofton who flies frequently from BWI. "I didn't realize this was here, but it's really, really helpful. It makes you wonder why they didn't do this before."

Jerry Fondaw, whose company sells the parking system for Lucerne, Switzerland-based Schick Electronics SA, surmises that more U.S. airports will start to look at the technology when they begin to run out of room to build more parking spaces. That has long been the case throughout Europe, where the technology has been in use for about 20 years.

Fondaw's company has submitted proposals to airport authorities in Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Jose and has been responding to queries around the country for shopping malls as well.

"Since BWI decided to go with this, we've had airports calling us daily," he said. "It's a good amount of money to spend per parking space, but when you're late catching an airplane or picking someone up, then it saves time and it's not all that expensive."

The technology also gives airport operators the opportunity to price garage spaces according to use. Theoretically, information gathered by the new parking system could allow them to implement different pricing structures. Last week, officials raised the maximum daily rate to \$30 in the garage; there are no plans at this time to increase rates for the new system.

Ultimately, the goal is to make BWI as convenient as possible to use, officials said.

That seemed to resonate among sixth-level parkers, who were unaware of the new system.

"It would be unfortunate for me to have to compromise my time to have to get here early to find a parking spot," said Barb Plunkett, of Baltimore. "So I would hope the airport would be thinking about that for me. Because right now, you have to drive around like a crazy person to park."