



Downtown Parking Assessment

Prepared by: Middle Georgia Regional Commission

2023

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Executive Summary

Between November 2022 and February 2023, the Middle Georgia Regional Commission partnered with the City of Perry and Perry Downtown Development Authority to re-examine the parking needs and usage within the city's downtown area. This study was an update to an earlier assessment completed in 2018. This downtown area was roughly bounded by Northside Drive to the north, Central Street to the south, Second Street to the east, and Legacy Park to the west.

Overall, the downtown parking occupancy rate was approximately 34 percent across all times, days, and locations. This was the same overall occupancy rate as in 2018 but over a much larger geographical area. Within the downtown's 'core area' (which represents the more compact area analyzed in 2018), parking occupancy rose to 47 percent overall, peaking at 55 percent during the most heavily trafficked times of the day. Peak hours generally fell in the 11:00 am – 2:00 pm timeframe (similar to 2018), but notable increases were seen on Fridays and Saturdays. This represented approximately 13 percent greater parking occupancy across all times than in 2018.

The more detailed analysis indicated seven specific blocks or lots that routinely met or exceeded the target standards for parking occupancy set forth by the Federal Highway Administration of around 80 percent for public parking within a city center. This metric roughly translates to the idea of one or two vacant spaces per block as cars drive by in search of parking. Meanwhile, parking occupancy in excess of 90 percent is typically perceived by motorists as full. In these seven areas, the lot or block will often meet this definition of full during peak hours.

With that said, the total amount of parking spaces within walking distance has increased over the past five years, and many conveniently located spaces are regularly unoccupied. This is particularly true along Main Street, where parking spaces within 500 feet of the middle of downtown are typically occupied less than 20 percent of the time. This low rate of usage even extends into the peak hours, with some spaces never being occupied in any of the 60 surveys completed. This would seemingly indicate that rather than truly having a shortage of total parking spaces, **the City of Perry has an opportunity to consider action items that both manage parking in the high-demand areas while also attempting to encourage greater parking use in the low-demand areas.**

Potential action items are detailed further in the report and include a variety of actions including improved signage and lighting, redesigns of underutilized spaces, more regular parking enforcement, and parking meters. Any of these potential solutions would require considerable public engagement and cooperation with local partners. However, the City of Perry is generally well-positioned to manage future growth sustainably.

Introduction

In 2018, the City of Perry and Perry Downtown Development Authority first identified the need for a parking study that would identify the availability of parking throughout the downtown area. To address this need, the City of Perry asked the Middle Georgia Regional Commission (MGRC) to conduct an analysis of vacancy rates for on-street parking in a focused area within the downtown area. This study concluded at the time that the parking inventory in the City of Perry was adequate to meet the current needs of the community and that a potential surplus of parking existed. This study area was bounded by Commerce Street to the north, Main Street to the south, Macon Road to the east, and the Georgia Southern Railway to the west. Within this area, the overall parking occupancy was 34 percent, rising to 42 percent during peak hours.

In the following years, economic activity continued to grow in the downtown area of Perry, even despite the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. New construction resulted in the establishment of Legacy Park, as well as the new Commodore Building on Commerce Street. Popular new businesses also opened during this time, including Morning by Morning Coffee Company, Orleans on Carroll Street, and the Muse Theatre.



The local perception was that these businesses not only increased the total amount of traffic downtown but also increased the parking demands. In coordination with the City of Perry and Perry Downtown Development Authority, a follow-up study was commissioned to build upon the findings from 2018. This study occurred between November 2022 and February 2023 to re-examine the parking availability downtown.

Like the 2018 study, this assessment only included publicly owned parking spaces (whether on-street or in designated public parking lots). Core differences from the 2018 study included the addition of evening survey times and the expansion of the overall study area. As requested by the City of Perry, the new study boundaries were established as Northside Drive to the north, Central Street to the south, Second Street to the east, and Legacy Park to the west. Naturally, the expansion of the study area and the addition of new parking spaces (from approximately 310 spaces in 2018 to roughly 582 spaces in 2023) has the potential to change the overall occupancy rates. To show change over time while keeping other factors constant, the study results will also include results from the "core area," which mirrors the same geography as the 2018 study.

Methodology

The methodology for the 2023 study was substantively the same as in 2018. Parking was identified by way of a simple windshield survey where MGRC staff would identify if spaces were vacant or occupied at a snapshot in time. A space was considered “occupied” if the MGRC vehicle passing by was unable to park in the spot. This controlled for situations where a vehicle was parked badly (taking up multiple spaces), was loading/unloading, or when spaces were unavailable for any other reason (such as utility work or for an event). Similarly, this definition was used for incidents where other vehicles were leaving or entering a parking space. If the vehicle was positioned at the time the MGRC vehicle approached the space, so that parking was unavailable for the surveyor, it was considered occupied, even if a brief circle of the block would have led to a vacant space. This definition was selected to assume the most limited supply of parking availability.



MGRC staff also noted multiple instances of vehicles illegally parked in spaces that were designated as “no parking” zones. These vehicles were not noted in the study findings; however, the total number of illegally parked vehicles was generally minimal. The exception to this rule was the area of Jernigan Street between Carroll Street and Commerce Street and in front of Schultz's Old Fashioned Soda Shop. In this area, one or two additional cars would regularly be parked illegally.

To determine the availability of spaces, MGRC conducted a total of 60 on-site surveys in the City of Perry. Survey times included Early Morning (9:30 am – 10:00 am), Late Morning (11:30 am – 12:00 pm), Early Afternoon (1:00 pm – 2:00 pm), Late Afternoon (3:30 pm – 4:00 pm), and Early Evening (6:30 pm – 7:00 pm). Two surveys were conducted for each time slot on each day of the week (Monday – Saturday). MGRC staff discussed these survey times with staff from the City of Perry to confirm that this would present an accurate estimate of parking usage and availability. Sundays were not measured for parking availability due to the relatively small number of businesses in downtown Perry that operate on Sundays. Churches operating in the downtown area each have their own private off-street parking spaces, which mitigate their impact on public parking spaces. Previously, evenings were also excluded from the study due to a lack of businesses operating during those hours. However, new establishments like Main Street Bar, Orleans on Carroll Street, and Patio 901, all stay open until late in the evening. This decision was validated by the data, which showed evenings having higher rates of parking occupancy than either the early morning or late afternoon time slots.

Finally, this assessment methodology focuses on baseline parking occupancy, assuming that no major events, activities, or festivals are occurring that would drastically affect the availability of downtown parking. Naturally, these types of events are significant draws for people and vehicles. However, it can also be expected that attendees would be willing to walk somewhat further to reach an event that has a unique appeal compared to an ordinary business. The City of Perry continues to have opportunities for designated overflow spaces in partnership with the many churches downtown and owners of other large parking lots like Synovus Bank, Persons Bank, and the Houston County Board of Education.

Headline Survey Results

The following section includes an aggregation of overall parking occupancy rates by survey time, date, and overall. This ensures a minimum of at least 10 samples for each day and 12 samples for each time period. A more detailed level of analysis (i.e., Monday Early Mornings) would not have sufficient data to draw conclusions.

Occupancy by Time (All spaces)	Occupancy Rate (2023 Full Area)	Occupancy Rate (2023 Core Area)	Hist. Occupancy Rate (2018 Core Area)
Early Morning	29%	38%	25%
Late Morning	40%	55%	42%
Early Afternoon	38%	52%	41%
Late Afternoon	31%	42%	29%
Early Evening	32%	47%	n/a
Overall	34%	47%	34%

Occupancy by Day (All spaces)	Occupancy Rate (2023 Full Area)	Occupancy Rate (2023 Core Area)	Hist. Occupancy Rate (2018 Core Area)
Monday	30%	39%	34%
Tuesday	34%	46%	38%
Wednesday	37%	51%	38%
Thursday	36%	49%	37%
Friday	36%	50%	35%
Saturday	32%	47%	25%
Overall	34%	47%	34%

In general, the aggregated results indicate that late morning and early afternoon times remained the busiest times for parking downtown, with all times consistently around 13 percent higher in the core area than measured in 2018. The largest changes were seen on Fridays and Saturdays—representing a significant increase in downtown activity on those days, which may be reflective of changes in visitation patterns to downtown Perry over the last five years. Collectively, this shows that parking within the core area has become more crowded over the past five years.

Data Analysis

While the headline results help gather an overall picture of parking in downtown Perry, they do not fully answer the question of whether parking is sufficient downtown. Guidance from the Federal Highway Administration presents a target occupancy rate of around 80 percent for public parking within a city center. This metric roughly translates to the idea of one or two vacant spaces per block as cars drive by in search of parking. By targeting this rate, the city can minimize cruising as people look for parking (which also leads to traffic congestion) while also ensuring that valuable downtown real estate is not wasted by excess parking. If parking occupancy exceeds approximately 90 percent, a block or lot will typically be perceived by drivers as full. Alternatively, parking usage of less than 60 percent represents an underutilization of available assets and/or an excess of parking.

Likewise, the spatial distribution of parking spaces remains highly important as well. With the expanded parking study area, walking from one end of the study area to the far end now stretches approximately two-thirds of a mile, which would take nearly 15 minutes to walk for a one-way trip. Given that the average person only walks around 0.8 miles total as part of a walking trip, it would not be reasonable to expect that all parking spaces are considered reasonable for every end destination, even though no parking space in the study area is greater than a 0.8-mile round trip to the center of downtown. The result is that parking management can be analyzed at a hyper-local level. Policies can also be customized to the level of an individual block to best ensure successful parking management throughout a downtown area.

These metrics allow for more in-depth analysis at the individual block level to determine which blocks are exceeding the threshold to be considered regularly full, especially during peak hours. The result of this analysis is the identification of seven blocks or lots that typically exceed the 80 percent target or are typically at full capacity. These are the areas where specific interventions may be warranted by the city to manage to park more effectively. These areas are highlighted in the table below and on the inset map on the following page. Occupancy rates are calculated to exclude handicap-accessible spaces in the block-level analysis. Peak hours represent the late morning and early afternoon surveys.

Parking Block/Lot Location	Overall Occupancy Rate	Peak Hour Occupancy Rate
1. Lot at Corner of Commerce St. and Washington St.	78%	91%
2. Ball St. from Commerce St. to Carroll St.	79%	85%
3. Ball St. from Carroll St. to Main St. (excluding surface lots)	80%	91%
4. Jernigan St. from Commerce St. to Carroll St.	87%	93%
5. Jernigan St. from Carroll St. to Main St.	80%	83%
6. Carroll St. from three spaces west of Jernigan St. to Ball St.	92%	96%
7. Carroll St. from Ball St. to Washington St.	84%	94%



Areas of High Parking Usage (Overall Occupancy Percentage)

Alternatively, while some individual blocks regularly fill up, substantial parts of the city have virtually no on-street parking usage. Notably, 10.2 percent of parking spaces were never occupied in any of the 60 surveys conducted. Including these spaces, 34.6 percent of spaces were occupied less than 10 percent of the time during the survey process. While many of these include outlying parking spaces along First Street, at the Perry Arts Center, or Legacy Park, these also include spaces on Ball Street and Main Street. The best example of this is the parking space numbered "110" in the survey, which is located at the intersection of Ball Street and Main Street, was never once occupied in any of the 60 surveys. This seemingly indicates that there are parking spaces that are extraordinarily convenient to downtown businesses but are rarely (if ever) used. This certainly may not be convenient for elderly visitors downtown or persons with disabilities. However, working from the assumption that the average visitor would be able and willing to walk somewhere from 300-500 feet to their destination, allows the city to consider action items that both manage parking in the high-demand areas while also attempting to encourage greater parking use in the low-demand areas.

Action Items

Again, working from the assumption that Perry is a safe community and has a walkable downtown that can support short amounts of walking, there is a variety of options available that can help manage any parking challenges. This is true because the total parking inventory of downtown Perry is sufficient for current demand. The challenge is simply ensuring that the most convenient and easy-to-find spaces are available for those who most need them—especially the elderly and shoppers with disabilities. Likewise, potential customers will always take priority over the employees of a business in terms of finding convenient parking. The first potential solutions address the currently vacant parking and later potential solutions will apply to the spaces that consistently remain full.

Improved Lighting, Striping, and Signage

One of the easiest and most cost-effective ways to help perceptions of parking is to make sure that parking areas are clearly lit, striped, and have appropriate signage. The city's lot along Washington Street always fills up quickly and fully due to its very clear location and signage. Likewise, the lot is clearly marked. In contrast, the city's lot on Ball Street fills up slower than the street it is on. Signage for this lot is only indicated on Main Street (not on Ball Street), and the lot itself has striping that has been worn down or ends up covered in leaves. In addition, the striping pattern (and shape of the lot) can be somewhat confusing, leading to underutilization.

It may also be worthwhile to consider adding signage to the other two public parking lots downtown—the lot at Legacy Park, and the other on Macon Road. In particular, the Macon Road lot is quite convenient to many downtown businesses but contains no streetlights or signage indicating that it is public parking. Given its location near the Perry United Methodist Church, a driver could easily assume that the lot is owned by the church. As shown by the photo below, there is very little indication that a lot even exists on that property—especially as trees obstruct the view of the lot from the major Swift Street and Macon Road intersection. This is not a suggestion to remove the trees, but rather an opportunity that signage can easily address.





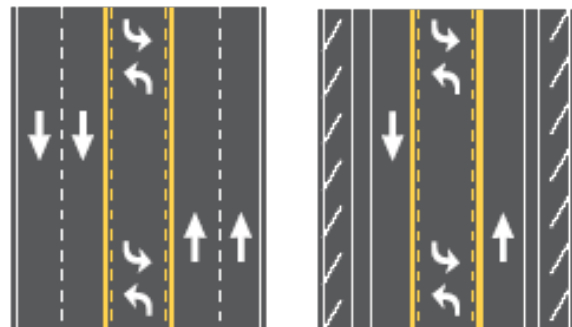
Likewise, additional on-street parking could even be marked by simple road signs that point people to Washington Street or Main Street. Some visitors may not know that parking even exists off the main roads on which they normally travel. The marked parallel spaces near the New Perry Hotel along Ball Street and the marked parallel spaces on Washington Street near Synovus Bank are great examples of these types of spaces that are quite convenient but have almost nonexistent use. If usage increases in these locations, the signs could also be easily located on lots or streets that are slightly further out, such as Jernigan Street or the Perry Arts Center.

Convert Parallel Parking Spaces to Angled Spaces (Main Street Road Diet)

In the 2018 study, one of the potential action items was a discussion with the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) and other local stakeholders regarding the design and use of Main Street. The 2018 assessment noted that parking on Main Street was widely underutilized. Given that the road is designed with parallel parking spaces on both sides, chronic underutilization of parking spaces can lead to greater issues. The open spaces present drivers with the illusion of a wider road where they can drive faster. Higher speeds lead to increased difficulty and danger with parallel parking while also making the road more dangerous for pedestrians. This perception creates a negative feedback loop with less activity on Main Street.

Since 2018, some major changes have been made to Main Street. When the Perry Parkway was designated as US-341, bypassing downtown, GDOT turned control of Main Street back to the City of Perry. Since that time, the city has made notable changes such as reconfiguring the intersection with Carroll Street and adding additional on-street parallel parking spaces. However, the lack of usage persists along Main Street—even near some of the busiest parts of downtown. The roadway itself remains a rather wide barrier—the widest street throughout downtown—separating businesses on one side from the other. This may also contribute to a lack of interest in crossing Main Street for easily available and accessible spaces.

As such, a “road diet” may remain a possible option for Main Street. In a road diet, the effective and perceived width of a road is reduced. This could be accomplished through a combination of new bike lanes, wider sidewalks, and landscaping as well as using angled parking rather than parallel parking. These design changes would likely make the corridor more aesthetically pleasing and would create a feeling of greater safety for pedestrians trying to cross Main Street—especially at Jernigan Street where intersection controls were removed.



An example road diet reconfiguration from the Federal Highway Administration demonstrating a change from five lanes to three lanes, with angled parking.

Enforcement of Current Traffic and Parking Regulations

Beyond the approaches that will make typically vacant spaces more appealing to drivers, the City of Perry can also act to disincentivize the continued use of the most popular and in-demand spaces. The first way to do this is simply through more aggressive enforcement of the parking laws that are already on the books. First (and particularly important from the standpoint of equity) is ensuring that only authorized vehicles park in the handicap-accessible parking spaces. Not surprisingly, handicap-accessible spaces are also more frequently occupied on the busier blocks of downtown. These spaces are important for downtown patrons who may struggle or be unable to walk the length of a block. Although MGRC staff did not actively monitor compliance with these parking regulations while surveying, surveyors often remarked that they observed unmarked vehicles parking in these handicap-accessible spaces.

Similarly, the block of Carroll Street between Ball Street and Washington Street is a unique space where signage indicates that parking should be limited to two hours only. Anecdotally, this area did tend to see greater rates of turnover than other parts of the city. However, evidence of parking enforcement in this area was somewhat limited. Surveyors tended to observe that some cars would overstay the two-hour window. Aggressively enforcing the regulations of this block can help to further address concerns about parking availability.

Furthermore, the presence of parking enforcement staff also allows for the city to ticket illegal parking. Some hotspots routinely had extra cars parked in designated no-parking spaces. These illegal parking maneuvers could make driving around downtown more dangerous and could also block pedestrian thoroughfares.

Finally, the presence of tractor-trailers driving through downtown can also indirectly affect parking usage as drivers and pedestrians perceive threats to their safety. Within the study area, none of the designated state routes have on-street parking locations. However, if trucks traveling to or from their destination on the south ends of Jernigan Street or Ball Street opt to go through downtown, conflict points can emerge. Some community members noted this as a concern for the convenient yet underutilized spaces along Ball Street. If the City of Perry can continue getting more heavy trucks to use the Ball Street Extension instead of going downtown, some parking spaces may become more attractive.

Metered and/or Timed Parking

Beyond the regular enforcement of existing laws, the City of Perry could also implement targeted parking solutions to help force the turnover of vehicles and to ensure the availability of parking spaces in high-demand areas. The easiest starting point would be to expand the time limits on parking downtown to only two hours on a variety of streets. Again, however, this becomes an enforcement challenge as noted earlier.



As such, parking meters may be even more effective than time limits on parking and can quite possibly pay for themselves. The city may also opt to contract with a management company that would bear responsibility for the installation and enforcement of parking meters. Although management of a parking program itself is not an easy task, business owners in Macon-Bibb County generally responded positively to the meters, as they allowed more customers to visit their shops and increased foot traffic downtown.

Public Messaging

Regardless of which strategies are employed, effective public messaging will be key for encouraging widespread adoption and making sure that the public is on board with the changes. Even the most innovative solutions will quickly fail without public support. Among the first questions the city should ask potential stakeholders is to identify the specific problems that the city's parking program will try to address. Simply stating that the parking spaces are full does not constitute a definite problem until it can be explained what specific negative harms are coming from the occupancy of parking spaces. From there, stakeholders can be engaged.

When talking with stakeholders, the City of Perry will want to ensure that concerns are clearly heard and that influential partners are at the table early. This will allow the city to discuss specific policy proposals that can address the identified problems. Once these concerns are addressed, messaging can shift to a broader public strategy with key talking points.

Conclusion

The longitudinal element of this study shows that parking occupancy has notably increased throughout downtown Perry in recent years. More spaces are occupied more frequently, and some blocks regularly meet the definition of 'full' during peak hours. However, many scarcely occupied spaces remain. These observations are provided at face value, and so this study does not seek to conclude if Perry has a "parking problem" or not. The study does indicate that some areas routinely have high levels of usage, which may lead to interest from the community regarding actions that the local government can take to ensure that the city's public parking spaces are used both valuably and efficiently.





2023 Downtown Perry Parking Study

Occupancy Rate (Overall)

N

0 0.05 0.1 0.2 Miles

Overall

- █ 0%-20%
- █ 21%-40%
- █ 41%-60%
- █ 61%-80%
- █ 81%-100%
- █ Construction Spaces

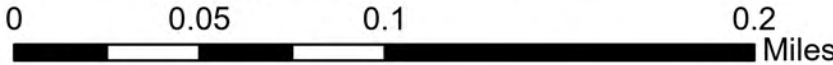


Map Created in March 2023 by the Middle Georgia Regional Commission. Please use for general planning purposes only.



2023 Downtown Perry Parking Study

Occupancy Rate
(Early Morning)



Early Morning

- 0%-20%
- 21%-40%
- 41%-60%
- 61%-80%
- 81%-100%
- Construction Spaces



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2023 Downtown Perry Parking Study

**Occupancy Rate
(Late Morning)**

0 0.05 0.1 0.2 Miles

N

Late Morning

- 0%-20%
- 21%-40%
- 41%-60%
- 61%-80%
- 81%-100%
- Construction Spaces

MGRC
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2023 Downtown Perry Parking Study

Occupancy Rate
(Early Afternoon)



Early Afternoon

- 0%-20%
- 21%-40%
- 41%-60%
- 61%-80%
- 81%-100%
- Construction Spaces



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2023 Downtown Perry Parking Study

Occupancy Rate (Late Afternoon)

N

0 0.05 0.1 0.2 Miles

- Late Afternoon**
- 0%-20%
 - 21%-40%
 - 41%-60%
 - 61%-80%
 - 81%-100%
 - Construction Spaces



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2023 Downtown Perry Parking Study

Occupancy Rate
(Early Evening)

N

0 0.05 0.1 0.2
Miles

Early Evening

- 0%-20%
- 21%-40%
- 41%-60%
- 61%-80%
- 81%-100%
- Construction Spaces



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