Guest Column/ David G. Wilson

Parking fees must increase

If you wish to lead a quiet life in harmony with your fellowmen, never discuss politics, religion, or parking. Of the three topics, most likely to result in bloodshed is parking. The reason is that MIT parking is an extremely valuable gift handed out to a favored few. What is wrong can be illustrated by an anecdote about a completely different area: nuclei.

At the height of the energy shortage a few years ago, and in the middle of a very cold January, someone phoned me to ask to go to the Quad-Cities nuclear power plant in Illinois. I should get there, I was told, by flying to Moline, renting a car, and driving north by the frozen Mississippi for 30 miles or so. "You'll see the plant — there is a huge column of vapor coming out of it. The environmentalists would kill us if we let this fire go to cool the condensers, so we had to build a big cooling pond. It actually boils in summer. Right now it's just simmering but."

It was just as he said. As I drove up I heard on the radio how factories all over the Midwest were being shut down because of the shortage of nuclear power, to give priority to home-heating. "The cost of providing a parking place is, however, around $500 a year. About half of these costs are met by overhead on research accounts, and half on general Institute funds. The costs of providing a parking place is, however, around $500 a year. About half of these costs are met by overhead on research accounts, and half on general Institute funds."

I parked the car near the cooling pond, and made a dash through the crowd to the visitors' lobby. It was gloriously overheated. "Thank goodness you're using the waste heat to keep the building warm," I said to my host. There was an awkward silence. "We're not using the waste heat. We're using natural gas."

The situation was appalling, but it was all perfectly logical. The price of natural gas was so low that it was almost free — held there by a law of Congress. To have used the waste heat to heat the buildings would have cost the investors and taxpayers a great deal more than the simple use of natural gas.

The deal, if we have to find one, was the artificially low price to which natural gas was held. The low price promised widespread spread and massive waste, and made exploration for new sources uneconomic. The same is true if MIT with regard to parking. The results can be seen. Parking is virtually free — a fee of $7 per year was recently imposed — and the demand for parking space is leading to general unavailability.

The only justifiable alternative is pricing. The Columbia University economist Willis Vickrey has proposed a simple rule to determine the appropriate price for parking. The price should be that at which there will always be a surplus — say five percent — of places free.

This rule should apply to private and on-street parking, such as Memorial Drive. If this rule were followed, people who wish to park at MIT and who were willing to pay for the privilege would be assured that there would always be places for them. All manner of other good consequences would flow from such a pricing policy. Overhead charges on research and other accounts would be reduced. Capricious and wasteful use of parking places would decrease. Traffic would flow more smoothly in the local streets. Buses would move faster and have more customers. Some people who were interloping between walking and driving could get a little fitter.

Furthermore, we have learned from Undergraduate Association President Bryan R. Moser ’87 that the cancellation was due to a failure on the part of the MIT administration. The only justifiable alternative is pricing. The Columbia University economist Willis Vickrey has proposed a simple rule to determine the appropriate price for parking. The price should be that at which there will always be a surplus — say five percent — of places free.

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