

PARKING: Lot rentals generally not advertised

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make nearly as much as Disney and neighboring LeMoine Elementary, which is blocks from Wrigley Field and clears a cool \$225,000 from baseball fans and overnight parkers. But even an extra \$5,000 to \$50,000 per year can pay for field trips and art programs the schools couldn't otherwise provide.

Despite the potential in fast-growing neighborhoods, parking lot leases remain an isolated moneymaker, one that is not marketed by the district and is mostly spread through word-of-mouth by enterprising principals.

For example, two elementary schools sit in the shadow of U.S. Cellular Field, but neither rents spaces on game nights.

Officials say there hasn't been a demand. Until this year, games didn't sell out often and ticket holders usually could find spots in ballpark lots. But that may change next season given the anticipated demand of seats for the world champion White Sox.

And there's not a single school in Wicker Park that markets its lots to residents and restaurants in the hot singles neighborhood.

Leasing lots can be a hassle

Schools use parking to drive revenue

Chicago Public Schools have been leasing out overnight parking spaces in their lots, which has proved to be an invaluable source of income for extras such as after-school programs, books and computers.

SCHOOLS THAT LEASE PARKING SPOTS

TOP 5 EARNERS

By annual revenue

- 1 School: LeMoine Elementary
Neighborhood: Wrigleyville
Revenue: \$225,000
- 2 School: Disney Magnet
Neighborhood: Buena Park
Revenue: \$175,000
- 3 School: Jones College Prep
Neighborhood: South Loop
Revenue: \$84,000
- 4 School: Ogden Elementary
Neighborhood: Near North Side
Revenue: \$61,000
- 5 School: Blaine Elementary
Neighborhood: Wrigleyville
Revenue: \$49,000

Source: Chicago Public Schools



Chicago Tribune

for principals, even though the programs are supposed to be managed by private parking companies that pay schools a flat fee to lease their lots.

Disney Principal Kathy Hagstrom said she gets it from both sides: Teachers and parents grouse when they can't find a spot early in the morning, and residents call to complain when tow trucks snag their cars.

But given all the headaches a principal must endure, one that yields \$175,000 is well worth enduring, Hagstrom said.

In all, Disney gets about \$1.2 million in discretionary money from state and federal grants, but most of that money is targeted for extra staff, training and materials.

The beauty of the parking money is that it has no strings. She plans to spend about \$2,000 of the parking money this year to offer an after-school ballroom dance program for her older students—the same kind of pilot program the Board of Education is launching at 18 other schools.



Tribune photo by David Klöbucar

An overnight renter exits the parking lot as the 7 a.m. deadline approaches at Disney Magnet School in the Buena Park neighborhood. The school brings in \$175,000 per year in space rentals.

"It makes a huge difference having this money," Hagstrom said. "But even with all the wonderful opportunities this money provides, it can be an administrative nightmare."

Parking isn't the only way for schools to earn extra money for programs. About 56 schools earn a combined \$1.4 million a year by leasing space on their roofs for cellular antennas, including five schools that get as much as \$60,000 per year for two antennas.

About 25 schools lease their auditoriums, gyms and cafete-

rias to churches and other community groups, earning rent ranging from \$25,000 to \$96,000 per year.

An employee in the district's real estate office helps schools negotiate leases with cellular firms and parking companies, tracking which neighborhoods are in the hottest demand. The schools get to keep all the money save for a portion of the first-year's cellular leases.

"It works pretty much from word of mouth. . . . We allow schools to take the lead on this," said Sean Murphy, chief operations officer for Chicago Public Schools. "At this point, we don't generally market these services to schools. Principals are generally very resourceful, especially given our budget situation."

Healy Elementary Principal Mary Ellen Ratkovich, whose Bridgeport school sits about six blocks from U.S. Cellular Field, said she never thought about renting spaces on the school's blacktop to fans.

But she's thinking about it now. She figures the team will have a fair share of sell-out games next season, and fans might be willing to walk a few blocks for a cheaper spot.

"We'd certainly be in on that if [the district] would be willing to help us out," Ratkovich said. "If it brings in money for books and field trips, there's always a need."

Some schools don't want to bother with the program. "They don't see the benefits," Murphy said. "They just see it as a hassle. They don't understand we put all the burden on the parking companies. They have to plow the lots. They have to handle the towing."

Disney is blessed with about 225 spaces on its sprawling 11-acre lakefront campus, including 75 underground spots. When Hagstrom decided to start renting garage spots this fall for \$6 per night, the staff complained they couldn't get access to the coveted spots in time for their 7:30 a.m. start.

Parents driving in from other neighborhoods also grumbled they couldn't find spots to stop and walk their children to the door.

Hagstrom said she dealt with these complaints by urging the parking contractor to crack down on the 7 a.m. deadline for moving overnight cars, which triggered a backlash from residents who had their cars towed. To ease parent concerns, she offered a drop-off lane where student patrol members escort younger children into the school.

She told the teachers she would consider leaving the underground lot empty for the

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—Rose Mills, overnight renter at the Disney Magnet School parking lot

night, but it could mean losing some of the extras teachers there have come to expect—unlimited copying privileges, or the extra \$1,500 given to every grade for special arts projects.

Rose Mills is happy the teachers value their unlimited copying. Mills has been parking for years in the lot, which is a one-block walk from her condo.

"Honestly, we had to come here because it's the only place in Buena Park," Mills said. "It's a little more expensive, but it's really convenient."

A few years ago, the demand for parking was practically nonexistent in the neighborhood around South Loop Elementary. But given a wave of new development and an influx of middle-class residents, the school's new principal figured he might be able to squeeze a few dollars out of his lot.

Principal Pat Baccellieri said the parking contract is modest—about \$6,000 per year—but the money brings computers and printers into more classrooms. The school also saves the estimated \$3,000 it spends plowing the lots every winter.

"We lost \$500,000 in discretionary money this year, so that \$6,000 is a start," Baccellieri said. "Initially when we started this there were some distressing phone calls, because [residents] were used to parking there for free."

Murray Language Academy Principal Michael Keno said schools can't always count on steady income from parking, but he still thinks it's worth pursuing.

When parking adjoined the school on Kenwood Avenue, the lot was so jammed with overnight renters that it was difficult for the staff to find a spot at 7:15 a.m. After an expansion forced the school to move its lot a block away to Dorchester Avenue last year, parkers went elsewhere and income from the lot dwindled from about \$23,000 per year to less than \$1,000 now, he said.

"I don't know why more schools don't try this," Keno said. "If I were in an area that was gentrifying, I'd be reaching out to the neighborhood."

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