Article 47

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The Benefits of Better Site Design in Commercial Development

Modern commercial development is dominated by the parking lot. Indeed, as much as half of the entire surface area of a typical office park or shopping center is devoted to parking. No one has ever stepped up to claim that they invented the parking lot, and their reluctance is understandable: the parking lot is a prime habitat for the car and not much else.

From an environmental standpoint, parking lots rank among the most harmful land uses in any watershed. Parking lots not only collect pollutants that are deposited from the atmosphere, but also accumulate pollutants that leak, drip or wear off cars. Researchers have found that parking lot runoff can have extremely high concentrations of nutrients, trace metals and hydrocarbons. Parking lots also influence the local air and stream temperatures. In the summer months, pavement temperatures can exceed 120 degrees Fahrenheit, which in turn increases local air temperatures five to 10 degrees compared to a shaded forest. Parking lots can also exacerbate smog problems, as parked cars emit greater levels of smog precursors under extreme heat island conditions (Scott *et al*., 1999).

Perhaps the greatest environmental impact of parking lots is hydrological in nature. Simply put, there is no other kind of surface in a watershed that produces more runoff and delivers it faster than a parking lot. When this runoff is discharged into a headwater stream, its great erosive power steadily degrades the quality of downstream habitats, unless exceptionally sophisticated stormwater practices are installed.

Is it possible to design a better parking lot? At first glance, there seems to be little opportunity to incorporate better site design into parking lots. However, the better site design techniques described earlier in this issue suggest a key design strategy: *work to incrementally shrink the surface area of the parking lots and then use the space saved to integrate functional landscaping and better stormwater treatment within the parking lot.* Through a series of relatively minor design adjustments, it is possible to reduce the surface area of parking lots by five to 20%. These design adjustments include curbing excess parking, incrementally reducing parking demand ratios, providing credits for mass transit, shrinking stall sizes, narrowing drive aisles, and using grid pavers for spillover parking areas.

In this article, we examine some of the benefits of employing better site design as they apply to commercial development. As with the residential redesign, this analysis also uses the Simplified Urban Nutrient Output Model (SUNOM) to compare actual commercial development sites constructed in the 1990s with the same sites redesigned utilizing better site design techniques. The two commercial developments analyzed include a retail shopping center and a commercial office park.

Our fairly conservative approach to parking lot redesign is intended to reflect realistic opportunities in a suburban setting. For example, we did not utilize shared parking, porous pavement, or structured parking in any of the redesigns, although each of these techniques is very effective. Nor did we reduce the basic footprint or size of the buildings in either scenario, although smaller “boxes” may well have been more appropriate for the zoning. Instead, our basic approach was to make a series of relatively modest changes in parking lot design to shrink parking lot area, and then implement better landscaping and stormwater treatment measures within the saved space.

This article reports on the potential benefits of parking lot redesign in terms of reduced runoff, pollutant export and development costs. It also reviews the initial experience of communities that are experimenting with new and innovative parking lot designs, and concludes with some implications for both the engineer and watershed manager.