

Budget 2016
Pre-Budget Submission
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Proposal 1: National Strategic Car Parking Levy

We have identified a threat to state transport policies, where Irish local authorities (LAs) may have a financial interest in encouraging more and more use of private cars. The causes and effect of this are discussed in more detail in an accompanying discussion document.

The state has invested in measures intended to promote sustainable travel such as walking, cycling and public transport, yet little overall growth has been seen. The way LAs use funds for sustainable transport often creates new problems or avoids fixing old ones. Unless the reasons for this are identified and fixed, the benefits from funding sustainable transport will be restricted. Worse: a situation continues where state funds meant to support sustainable transport end up being used essentially to facilitate car travel.

In various Irish towns road space has been taken from cyclists in order to provide on-street car parking. The traffic lanes that are left may be narrow, forcing cyclists into close proximity with heavy traffic. Although cycle facilities may be found on some peripheral roads, they often seem to disappear just where they are needed, with cyclists finding their way blocked by parked cars and traffic jams. Regardless of whether or not specific cycling facilities are provided, cyclists require road space so they can keep moving and have some clearance from passing cars. The Irish cycling experience is that this road space often disappears close to town centres. An example is the creation of one-way streets so as to facilitate the dedication of road space to car parking often this has the practical effect of making it illegal for children to cycle to school.



Galway City (Bohermore): Google Street View showing this strategic access corridor, the local authority has removed road space from cyclists to provide paid on-street parking. The disk parking arrangements with painted parking lanes and ticket machines can be seen.

Car parking fees, both from on-street and off-street parking are an important source of LA revenue. Figures in a 2010 report for the Irish Parking Association show that nationally, Irish LAs accounted for 27% of car-parking capacity and 33% of parking revenue.ⁱ The LA component of the business accounted for €115 million in annual revenue. The report indicates that Dublin City Council has annual parking revenue of €36m and that the three Dublin county councils generate more than €10m each year. The cities of Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford, are stated to have had a combined annual parking turnover of almost €20m. Various smaller towns also operate parking for revenue. Local authorities' ability to earn money from car parking creates a direct conflict of interest with state efforts to promote sustainable transport. Paid car parking gives Irish LAs a direct incentive to pursue growth in car traffic and encourage greater use of cars. By permitting LAs to charge for parking on streets, the state is encouraging them to take road space away from other forms of transport such as cycling. Even where on-street parking is free, it still represents the removal of road space from other forms of transport, and a way must be found to address this.

If some Irish LAs see their immediate financial self-interest in promoting private cars then they cannot be used as the main agencies in growing sustainable transport. If on-street car parking is treated as untouchable, then a state effort focused on funding roadside cycle facilities cannot deliver for cyclists in many Irish town and city centres.

The solution: Strategic car parking levies

Now that property taxes are being restored, this provides an alternative income stream that allows a rebalancing of LA activities in a positive direction. The needs of sustainable transport require action to correct local authority practices that promote private cars and damage and discourage other forms of transport. There must be a way to penalise LAs that take road space away from cyclists and public transport on key routes for the purpose of parking cars. While there may be a strategic need to provide off-street car parking in towns, it is important that LAs not profit from this to the point that promoting car travel becomes an end in itself. It is intended that this will result in the removal of on-street car parking at the affected locations.

It is likely that town-centre business interests will react with consternation and panic to the idea of any car-parking being interfered with. This is a natural reaction and their genuine concerns must be addressed. The solution we propose is for the state to introduce strategic levies on car parking supply. These could have other uses apart from aligning local authority behaviour with state policy. A system of levies that could be applied either to local authority parking or other locations might offer the simplest overall mechanism for delivering on state goals. The scheme should be structured so that it is flexible and can be applied by order rather than requiring primary legislation for any changes.

A system of car-parking levies would also have wider uses such as providing support for commerce in town centres and support for anti-congestion projects such as park and ride schemes. Such levies could be used to provide a level-playing field between hard-pressed town centres and out-of-town shopping centres that should not have been allowed in the first place.

ⁱ Irish Car Parking Sector Market Report (2010) Prepared for: Irish Parking Association, School of Marketing, Dublin Institute of Technology. November 2010.