

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: Get the parked cars off the street Downtown

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Madison motorists, unite!

As a citizen who drives Downtown to work every day, I have met the enemy. Quite simply, the enemy is the parked car on the street.

Pulling out from any parking lot on West Washington Avenue or Regent Street Downtown may be the worst. It is impossible to see the oncoming traffic because of parked cars blocking your view. One is forced to creep out far enough to see traffic without getting clipped. It also requires inching over the sidewalk and blocking the path of pedestrians and rule-breaking bicyclists.

This has led to my car being slapped by the Spandex-wearing peddlers, or I get the angry honk of the oncoming motorist who gives you a look that says, "Don't even think about it!"

There is more fear and loathing when attempting to drive toward the state Capitol on West Washington in the morning. Two eastbound lanes are moving smoothly until the gaggle of parked cars hits you at about the 500 block. At this point you are forced to inch left to avoid death, only to be met with another angry honk of the horn by the driver on your left! That person would rather see me die in a fiery crash than have enough room to turn right into the parking lot for our studio where we do our radio show.

Try heading west on Regent Street just past Park Street. The car in front in the right lane hits the breaks because of a parked car. You are then stopped until the wagon train of vehicles finally passes. You then hug the center line never to be caught until the next time you are suckered into thinking there are two lanes of traffic going in the same direction.

Another potential death trap is Stewart Street running east of Fish Hatchery Road just south of the Beltline. It's an industrial park back there. After getting some body work done on my car about a mile down, the murderers row of parked cars makes it terrifying to pull back out onto the narrow street. You have to use all your senses to detect an oncoming car that usually goes about 20 mph over the speed limit. Prayer may be your only recourse.

Auto body shop owner Rich Hamre says, "Businesses will park their cars on the street and that makes it impossible for a customer pulling out to see the traffic." Hamre adds, "If someone creeps out and gets hit, it is that person's liability." Hamre says one option is to park in the driveway and walk out to take a peak. If the coast is clear you can try to run back in your car and pull out without getting hit. God forbid somebody pulls out from a closer parking lot and shatters your escape.

So what do we get from his honor the mayor in his proposed capital budget? We get a whopping \$329.7 million plan that includes \$26 million to renovate the Municipal Building. Most of us try to avoid going there at all costs, but it's nice to think the workers may have a nice place to hang their hats. An additional \$8.2 million is in the capital budget for bicycle and pedestrian improvements, and \$6.4 million to relocate the Pinney library to Royster Commons on Cottage Grove Road. That doesn't include \$1.2 million to do more planning for the long held dream for a city market on East Washington.

Once again I refer you to Downtown visionary and architect Kenton Peters. He has a plan to more than double the parking in the Isthmus. He says the parked cars have become the face of our city. He proposes that the city buy one lot on each block. An enclosed surface lot would go there with low-income housing above it. That would move the 18 cars parked on that block into the parking lot.

The mayor wants to allocate \$4.5 million for low-income housing in his capital budget anyway. Where there was once parking, there would be grass and trees. Don't worry, no driveways would be violated. And glory, glory hallelujah, this plan would eliminate the horrific odd/even parking ordinance. Peters says the plan would pay for itself by the city selling the air rights for moderate and low-income housing above the new off-street parking lots and by reducing the snow plowing by 50 percent.

Now on a lighter note, Downtown driving isn't any easier when you are an impatient moron like this writer. Forgetting the UW students were back to school about two weeks ago, I attempted to turn left toward the Capitol from Kelly's Mobile Station on West Washington. The wait was too much, so I turned right. I then made another right on Regent followed by a right on Park. Dayton was blocked off so I advanced to Johnson only be stopped by a UW traffic quagmire. It took 30 minutes to go 400 yards.

Good things come to those who wait.

Mitch is a Madison, Wisconsin based commentator, broadcaster and standup comic. The Mitch Henck Show is broadcast live 8-11a.m. Monday-Friday at www.mitchhenck.com. and on 92.1FM, The Mic in Madison. Contact Mitch at: mitch@mitchhenck.com