New off-campus parking venture aims to solve shortage

Paul Laird, a Durham resident, is aiming to create a platform that matches spots with students across Durham

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Off-campus parking at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) has become increasingly harder to navigate amidst growing demand and a decrease in supply. One case is the old lot across from Stratford Avenue in Durham, which used to allow parking for students but is now under construction for a new fraternity home.

But it’s not just the students who are feeling the impact. Paul Laird, a Durham resident who lives on Madbury Road, is aiming to streamline the off-campus parking experience through an online platform that matches spots with students. Though he and his wife do not have any direct ties to the university, neighboring student housing, including numerous Fraternity and Sorority houses, has increased their involvement in the community.

“We live in the community,” he said. “We want to help out.”

Laird previously used his own extra driveway space to help a student whom he found through a Durham community Facebook group. This student had mentioned their knowledge of other peers looking for a space, to which Laird was more than accommodating, creating another spot for an additional vehicle. While on a small scale, the Lairds were able to make a difference for two students, but they knew there was more that could be done.

“The only place we could find where people were looking for parking and offering to help was in this closed Facebook group,” said Laird. “I think Facebook is more for older generations, so there’s this generational gap between the people who own these properties and the people who are looking for a spot.”

The university also recognizes this as a problem. In a 2022 Benchmark report by UNH’s Transportation Policy Committee, fall space inventory was at 7,019 auto spaces, down 13 from the previous year. A key takeaway from the report states that there is a continued increase in demand for visitor parking and resident student parking. During the past year, the university saw no changes in the total number of permits given out but saw a decrease in commuter student sales.
Laird aims to tackle this issue using his personal experience with off-campus parking and qualifications as a career software engineer.

“For the last few years we have been here, we’ve always seen people struggling getting parking; there’s usually long wait lines to apply, the prices are really high and every year it seems they’re actually reducing the amount of parking spots UNH students have,” he said. “We kind of felt bad. It’s hard. [Students] have to get to internships, work, go visit [their] families, things like that.”

The first step in the process was gauging the community’s interest, for which Laird used a Facebook post with a linked Google survey that allowed property owners to list their spaces and students to specify their requirements.

Then, Laird and his team manually matched these listings to guarantee privacy and efficiency. This option is available and frequently used by UNH students, though its only current access point is through emailing info@unhparking.com.

But as the plan advances, Laird stated that creating a comprehensive, automated platform is the ideal destination.

He is diligent in ensuring that this parking service is recognizably not related to the university to avoid confusion and infringement on brand rights. At this time, the email and service associated with Laird’s off-campus parking does include the school’s abbreviation, UNH. Because of this, Laird has chosen to rebrand to Find College Parking – a small part of progressing the service.

When asked about possible apprehension from property owners willing to rent spaces, Laird said it's not uncommon. He stated that making sure renters are within town guidelines is generally the biggest concern; the town of Durham only allows three vehicles in a property’s driveway. Of course, there is also the liability that comes with someone using your personal space. For instance, if the student doesn’t have vehicle insurance, the property owner could be responsible if something were to happen on their land. Laird also understands that having strangers coming in and out of one’s property isn’t for everyone.

“Every student we have rented to has been awesome and super respectful,” he said. “For us, it's been a great experience.”

Laird is hoping that with this update and future projections, people who don’t feel comfortable putting their addresses online, aren’t sure how to advertise, or don’t know if they qualify to rent out spaces will be assisted in the process. Currently, it is still in the early stages, though, according to Laird, the feedback from the community has been instrumental in determining what factors are most important to Durham residents.
Parking at UNH follows a permitting priority schedule that supports the missions of the university, as outlined by Marc Laliberte, a program admin specialist for campus services. Faculty and staff needs are recognized first, followed by commuter students, resident students, visitors and then students residing in off-campus housing within the commuter ineligibility zone. The commuter zone requires the student to be outside a one-mile radius of Thompson Hall, and at least .25 miles from a Campus Connector, Durham transit or another 3rd party bus stop.

“Naturally there are strong opinions and several sides to every notion, and of course money and competing priorities come into play, but the goal is to have as fair, safe, and reliable an infrastructure as possible, given many limitations and challenges,” Laliberte said.

As for off-campus parking, he said it's important to note that UNH does not have the space or infrastructure to offer commuter parking to people living off-campus, nor to make up for the lack of parking in private local apartment complexes.

“So those considering living in private apartments within the immediate vicinity of campus need to understand that commuter permits are not available to them, and storage parking is extremely limited,” he said.