Downtown Kalispell Parking Strategy

Prepared by Downtown Kalispell Forward (DKF)• 2026 Action Plan• 03.2026

Purpose

- Make parking work as an economic tool for a vibrant, 18-hour downtown.
- Improve clarity, turnover, and access using the spaces we already have—first.
- Deliver a practical 2026 rollout plan with measurable outcomes.

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Executive Summary

Downtown Kalispell's next chapter depends on easy access—especially for quick visits that turn into shopping, dining, and repeat business. Parking is the first focus of Downtown Kalispell Forward because it is the fastest, most practical lever we can pull to strengthen foot traffic, customer turnover, and business confidence.

Today, Kalispell has ample parking supply within the downtown core, but it is not working as a system. Confusing signs, uneven time limits, and employee "musical cars" in prime spaces create a perception of shortage—even when open stalls exist one to two blocks away.

This strategy converts parking from a perceived barrier into a visible advantage. In 2026, we recommend simplifying time limits, clarifying public lots, modernizing enforcement with license plate recognition (LPR), and pairing the rollout with wayfinding and proactive communication. The goal is simple: more customers parking close, more turnover on Main Street, and a downtown that feels welcoming, walkable, and easy to use.

Downtown parking, at a glance

- 2,410 total spaces in the downtown core (about one space per 650 sq ft of building floor area).
- 28% on-street; 72% off-street lots/areas.
- On-street parking is currently free and time-limited (primarily 2-hour, 8 AM–6 PM, Monday–Friday).
- Opportunity: better utilization through clear wayfinding, consistent time limits, and smarter enforcement.

The Case for Action

Introduction

Downtown Kalispell has experienced declining foot traffic and a weak retail climate in downtown. Shopping has shifted to suburban shopping centers and big-box retailers, leaving the historic downtown underutilized. Parking is a critical component of downtown vitality: research identifies parking availability as one of the top factors influencing the success of retail districts, ranking eighth in importance among high-street vitality factors. Yet misperceptions about parking abound; while municipal parking studies show that Kalispell has an abundant supply of spaces at all times of day, these spaces are often poorly marked, inconvenient for short visits, or improperly allocated to long-term parkers and employees. Consequently, many potential customers perceive downtown parking as scarce or frustrating, compounding the decline of retail activity.

The Downtown Kalispell Forward Coalition (DKF) commissioned this report to guide the City Council in adopting evidence-based policy changes that will leverage parking as an economic development tool. Our goals are to make parking primarily serve business patrons, ensure quick turnover, create a cohesive wayfinding system, and plan for future growth as downtown revitalizes.

Downtown Kalispell's parking situation should be proactively addressed through a combination of management improvements and long-term capital projects. The current plan – guided by extensive input from local

businesses and the public – is to start with "fixes" that maximize the existing infrastructure: better signage, smarter enforcement, and dedicated employee parking areas to free up customer spaces. These near-term steps, planned for 2026, are expected to improve the downtown parking experience within months. As these strategies take effect, the City and its partners will monitor usage data and refine policies (e.g. adjusting time limits or permit allocations) to continuously optimize the system.

Current Parking Capacity

Downtown Kalispell's parking inventory is a mix of on-street spaces and off-street parking lots/areas managed by various entities. Altogether, downtown contains about 2,410 parking spaces within the core area (approximately one space per 650 sq ft of building floor area). Of these, roughly 28% are on-street spaces and the remaining 72% are in off-street lots or garages. All on-street parking in downtown Kalispell is currently free (unmetered) but time-restricted. The standard curbside rule is a 2-hour limit from 8 AM – 6 PM, Monday through Friday (with shorter 30-minute zones at some corners and a few 15-minute loading zones). After 6 PM on weekdays (and on weekends and holidays), on-street spaces are generally open without restriction (except in areas signed for no overnight parking during winter). The City's parking enforcement officers use traditional methods (like tire-chalking) to enforce time limits, since parking sensors or license-plate recognition systems are not yet deployed downtown. No on-street parking fees are charged, so downtown shoppers and visitors can park for free as long as they move their vehicles within the posted time limits.

675 Public On-Street Parking Spaces: Curbside spaces on downtown streets; free but time-limited (primarily 2-hour limit, with 30-min spots on corners and a few 15-min loading zones). No on-street meters are in use. Enforced by periodic chalking of tires by city parking staff. Overnight on-street parking is generally not allowed in winter months to facilitate snow removal.

406 Public City-Owned Off-Street Lot Spaces: The City manages several surface lots within downtown (totaling ~3.8 acres of land). Some spaces are designated for monthly permit holders or employees (approx. 356 spaces). One city lot (the "Skyline" lot) provides ~50 free, unrestricted public parking spaces. Other city lots (e.g. at Valley Bank and near the Eagles building) are time-limited or permit-restricted; many have no attendants ("unmonitored") and were historically underutilized at times. As of 2017, the City's off-street lots included no-cost 2- or 3-hour spaces, metered spaces, and permit spaces, often not fully occupied.

888 Private Off-Street Parking Lot Spaces: Privately owned parking lots that serve customers of downtown businesses or the public. Key examples include retail center lots (e.g. Kalispell Center Mall), bank/store lots, and other shared lots. These are typically free for customers on a time-limited basis but are not managed by the City. Some are available for public parking during off-hours via informal agreement (e.g. certain church or bank lots after business hours). These could be candidates for future shared-use agreements to expand public parking supply during peak periods.

426 Private Off-Street Parking Lot Spaces (Restricted/Leased): Additional privately owned parking reserved for specific uses – e.g. spaces leased to individual downtown businesses or residents for employee parking, or restricted lots for tenants of offices and apartments. These are generally not open to the public.

Changing Parking Needs Over Time

Parking demand is dynamic. As tenants change, new businesses open, and downtown revitalization efforts succeed, the supply of and demand for parking will continually shift. Experts emphasize that parking management is not a one-time fix; communities must periodically reassess inventory, update data, and adapt policies. Cities should manage existing parking resources smarter—through sharing, pricing and information—rather than continually adding more spaces. To revitalize downtown, Kalispell needs an initial strategy focused on convenience and clear wayfinding; as the district becomes more vibrant, policies can evolve to manage increased demand and invest in additional facilities when necessary.

Importance of Accessible Parking to Economic Vitality

There are at least four parking spaces for every car in the United States, yet these spaces are unevenly distributed—oversupplied near big-box developments and scarce in downtowns[2]. Free and convenient parking draws shoppers to small businesses, whereas limited downtown parking pushes customers toward suburban retailers[2].

Accessible parking encourages business and cultural activities: in Eugene, Oregon, a free two-hour on-street program was implemented to draw more people downtown, and about a quarter of businesses reported increased patronage; however, employee parking reduced turnover, underscoring the need for enforcement and data. [13] Research also estimates that each prime on-street parking space can generate $150–$300 per day in retail sales, and that employee misuse of prime spaces can cost $45,000–$90,000 per year in lost sales[13].

Business Survey

The DKF administered surveys to downtown business owners in that last quarter of 2025. Participants consistently rated parking as their top concern. Business owners reported that customers struggle to find convenient parking, that downtown employees occupy prime spaces, and that poorly signed lots are underutilized. They emphasized the need for clear signage, shorter time limits for prime spaces, and outreach to employees about designated parking areas.

Robust community engagement is guiding these parking initiatives. Recent outreach has revealed consistent themes in what downtown stakeholders desire:

Business & Property Owner Surveys: In late 2025, DKF surveyed downtown merchants and property owners to identify top issues. The results underscore the importance of parking:

66.7% of respondents cited “parking availability” as one of their biggest challenges operating downtown. This was by far the most common concern, surpassing other issues like building maintenance costs or competition from outlying areas. (Many comments noted that customers frequently complain about “lack of parking”, or that employees have difficulty finding long-term parking.)

When asked what improvements would most help the downtown business environment, 67.6% of respondents checked “more parking solutions” – the highest of any category, indicating strong demand for better parking management or increased supply.

Relatedly, 58.8% of respondents identified “parking and accessibility” as a primary barrier to new businesses opening downtown, suggesting that entrepreneurs perceive inadequate parking as a deterrent to investing in the downtown core.

Only 17% of business owners said they would “definitely” expand their business downtown under current conditions, reflecting how parking (and other downtown challenges) may be limiting business growth. Many respondents explicitly mentioned improving parking as key to unlocking downtown’s potential.

Customer and Public Feedback: Although no formal customer survey has been completed yet, anecdotal evidence from downtown stores indicates that locals sometimes avoid downtown during peak periods due to fears of not finding convenient parking. Public comments at City meetings have echoed this: citizens have expressed that while they love downtown Kalispell’s amenities, they find parking “frustrating” when they cannot easily locate a spot near Main Street stores. This feedback aligns with the need for better wayfinding – many drivers simply aren’t aware of alternative parking a block or two off Main.

Stakeholder Committees and Workshops: The City and DKF have involved stakeholders in developing solutions. A parking subcommittee of the Parking Advisory Board and BID members convened to discuss an employee permit program and other management tactics, ensuring business perspectives are incorporated. The City has also hosted public forums on broader downtown streetscape changes (e.g. the Main Street Safety plan hearings in 2024–25), where parking is a prominent topic. In those forums, some residents voiced support for features like angled parking and more pedestrian-friendly design, while others raised concerns about losing convenient drive-up access to businesses. The mixed feedback on major changes highlights the need to balance improved parking and safety with maintaining easy access for locals.

Overall, community input reveals broad agreement that parking must be addressed first in revitalizing downtown. Both the data and the anecdotes point to the same conclusion: the current parking situation is not meeting local needs. People want to see practical improvements – more clearly available spaces, better guidance to parking, and solutions for employees – before they will fully support longer-term changes like street redesigns or big developments. The DKF plan’s emphasis on near-term parking fixes (signage, employee parking areas, etc.) is a direct response to this community feedback.

Parking Inventory Findings

City parking studies confirm the perception gap: hundreds of vacant spaces exist within a short walk of Main Street at all times of day, but misallocation and poor communication leave them unused. By reallocating this supply and using technology to monitor usage, Kalispell can provide convenience for patrons without constructing costly new garages.

Despite the overall capacity, downtown stakeholders have long identified parking as a critical issue. Several challenges affect the current parking system’s effectiveness:

Perception of Shortage & Convenience: Community surveys and outreach show a widespread belief that parking downtown is insufficient or inconvenient. Business owners report customers often mention trouble finding nearby parking , and 66–67% of downtown businesses cite “parking availability” as a top challenge for operating downtown . In the DKF survey, over two-thirds of respondents said that more parking solutions are needed to make it easier to do business downtown. This perception matters: if visitors or locals feel parking is too difficult, they may avoid downtown shops and restaurants.

High-Demand “Hot Spots”: While parking is generally available within a block or two, certain popular blocks experience consistent shortages. A prior parking study identified at least two congestion hot spots: (1) the E. Center Street/Kalispell Mall & Museum area, and (2) the Main Street corridor near Western Outdoor and the Kalispell Grand Hotel. These areas often see all nearby spaces filled at peak times, creating a sense of scarcity. Meanwhile, other blocks just a short walk away have surplus spaces even at midday (some block faces were less than 30% occupied at the peak hour). This imbalance suggests that better distribution and guidance of parkers (through signage, time-limit adjustments, and incentivizing use of underutilized lots) can help mitigate the perceived crunch.

Employee Parking & Enforcement Issues: Long-term employee parking has been a persistent issue. With on-street spaces closest to shops limited to 2 hours, downtown employees without access to designated parking often resort to “musical cars” – moving their vehicles every couple hours to avoid ticket. This behavior uses up prime customer spots and creates the impression of a constant shortage. The 2017 Downtown Plan observed that some areas with 2-hour limits could be converted to all-day parking to accommodate employees, since 12% of block faces were under 30% occupied even at peak times. Another issue has been relatively limited enforcement resources – relying on manual chalking means some cars can exceed time limits if enforcement is infrequent. The City Parking Advisory Board has recommended exploring technologies like license plate recognition (LPR) and enhanced enforcement for better turnover of short-term spaces . Business owners widely support finding solutions to get employees out of customer spots – either by providing alternative all-day parking or by enforcing rules more strictly .

Clarity of Regulations & Signage: The lack of consistent, visible signage and branding for public parking has been noted by both officials and visitors. The DKF Infrastructure Group found that many downtown lots are not clearly marked, leading to confusion about which lots are available for public use versus private parking. In some cases, older or unclear signs make it hard for drivers to find underused lots. This contributes to the feeling of “no parking” even when spaces do exist nearby. Better wayfinding signage (directing drivers to public parking areas) and uniform branding of parking lots have been identified as low-hanging fruit to improve utilization and user experience.

Aging Infrastructure & Future Growth: As downtown grows and attracts more businesses, housing, and events, the absolute number of parking spaces may become a true constraint. The 2017 plan noted that about 140,000 square feet of building space (in second floors and basements) could be activated for new businesses or residences in the future – which would increase parking demand. Without new parking options (or alternative transportation solutions), this could eventually strain the supply. Moreover, continued reliance on surface lots alone will limit downtown’s development potential: large surface lots consume valuable land that could be better used for new buildings and public spaces. Planning for structured parking is thus a key long-term need to allow higher-density redevelopment while meeting parking needs.

Parking Spaces

Parking Lots

Short-Term Recommendations (2026)

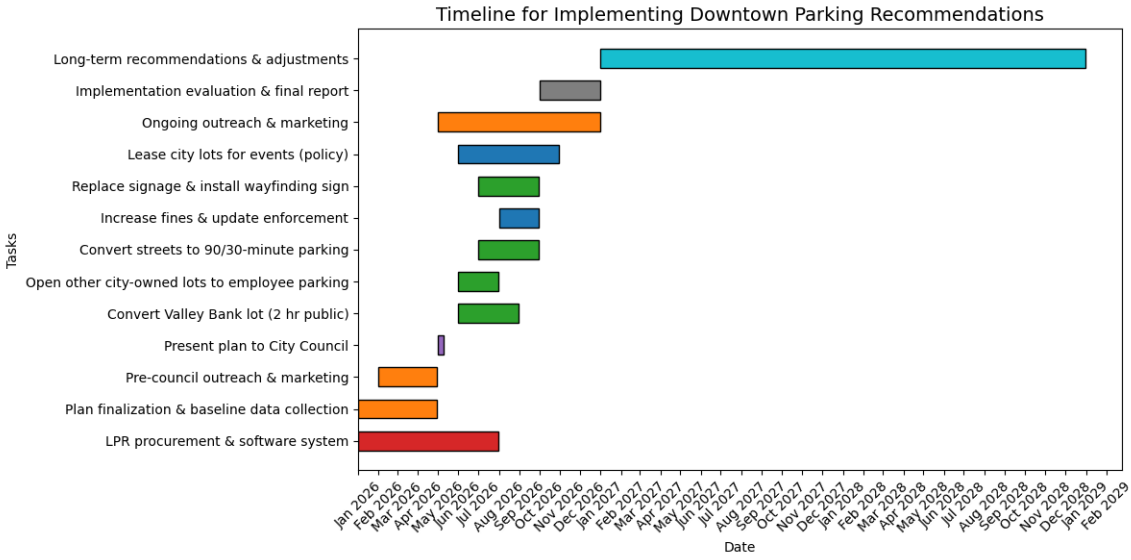
2026 priorities

- Convert the Valley Bank parking lot to free public parking with a 90-minute limit to maximize turnover and support nearby businesses.
- Procure a modern software system with mobile license-plate recognition (LPR) to track parking durations and detect whether vehicles are moved.
- Provide free, unlimited permits, valid for any city lot except the Valley Bank Lot, to all employees and business owners. Prohibit overnight parking to allow for morning employee parking & snow removal.
- Convert on-street parking on Main Street and between 1st Avenue W and 1st Avenue E to 90-minute parking, with a limited number of 30-minute spaces near high-turnover destinations such as the library, county buildings, city hall, and post office.
- Increase parking fines to $15 for the first violation and authorize additional tickets every 90 minutes.
- Improve wayfinding by installing attractive, consistent signs guiding patrons to public parking on Main Street, the Valley Bank lot, 1st Avenue E and 1st Avenue W.
- Replace existing parking signs with unified, high-contrast signage that clearly indicates time limits and restrictions.
- Allow city-owned downtown lots to be leased on weekends to organizations for events at nominal fees.

- Conduct targeted outreach and marketing to downtown employees and business owners.
- Identify funding sources for signage and technology investments.
- Engage in public-private partnerships to allow for usage of private lots during non-business hours

Implementation Timeline

A phased rollout minimizes confusion, supports training and "soft enforcement," and keeps stakeholders informed throughout 2026. We believe the parking issue will only be exacerbated by (1) the lack of current enforcement; and (2) the upcoming tourist season. Our hope is to move quickly on the short term recommendations and have something in place by this summer.



Phase and Major Milestones	Approx. Timing (2026)	Notes
Finalize plan and baseline data	Jan–Apr	While LPR procurement continues, complete baseline surveys, gather business and customer feedback, and finalize the DKF plan. Early planning prevents delays later. Replace signs weeks before enforcement takes effect.
Pre-council outreach & public meetings	Feb–Apr	Hold open houses, briefings and business workshops to explain proposed changes. Other cities found success by communicating months ahead of implementation and collecting community feedback.
Plan presented to City Council	Early May	DKF delivers the final plan at the first May Council meeting. At this stage Council may fine-tune

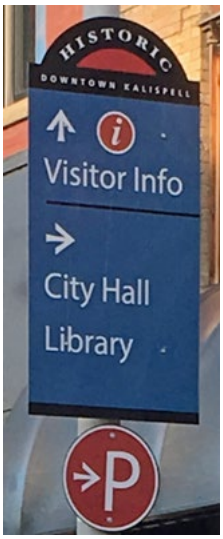
		enforcement and fines, similar to Poulsbo's review of penalties and employee parking before adopting an ordinance.
Post-approval mobilization	Jun	Begin outreach to explain Council-approved changes, prepare work orders, finalize contracts (e.g., for wayfinding signs and enforcement software) and recruit contractors. Update the city website and social-media channels with FAQs.
Convert Valley Bank lot to 90 minute parking	Jun–Aug	Re-stripe and sign the Valley Bank lot as two-hour public parking; abolish permits in other city-owned lots and designate those lots as free employee parking. Clear messaging will help employees move to these lots.
Replace signage and install wayfinding	Jul–Sep	Order and install consistent signage downtown and mount the new wayfinding sign at Main Street and other lots. Start with sign and permit replacement before adjusting rates.
Convert streets to 90-minute and 30-minute zones	Jul–Sep	Reconfigure parking on Main, 1st Ave W and 1st Ave E with 90-minute limits, reserving a few 30-minute spaces near libraries, county offices, City Hall and the post office. Ensure time-limit enforcement via the LPR system.
Update enforcement and fines	Aug–Sep	Align enforcement policies with new time limits: raise first-violation fines to $15 (with escalating penalties for repeat offenders) and begin issuing tickets every 90 minutes after an initial warning. Start with soft enforcement and training before full penalties.
Lease downtown lots for events	Jun–Oct	Launch a program allowing non-profit organizations to lease vacant city lots on weekends for nominal fees, reducing insurance and permitting barriers. This encourages evening and weekend events and supports the 18-hour downtown vision.
Ongoing outreach and marketing	May–Dec	Maintain a dedicated web page, distribute printed materials to businesses and hold quarterly information sessions. Regular updates, including Council briefings

		on enforcement and signage, will show open governance and allow mid-course corrections.
Evaluation and final report	Oct–Dec	Assess perception changes and occupancy data; compile enforcement statistics and business feedback. Present a year-end report to Council with any adjustments needed for 2027.

Wayfinding and Signage

Effective wayfinding fosters a sense of place and reduces driver frustration. DKF recommends adopting a distinct downtown sign family that features the new Downtown Kalispell logo, wavy edges and consistent colors. Signs should be positioned at entrances to downtown, at each public parking facility, and at key intersections. Best practices call for high-contrast lettering, simple language, and uniform placement so that drivers and pedestrians can quickly recognize official parking signs. A prominent header reading “Downtown Kalispell” will reinforce area identity while directional arrows and icons guide users to available parking.

Figure 1. Example of proposed downtown wayfinding sign to guide drivers to parking. This design uses bold colors, clear arrows, and a “P” symbol to differentiate parking from other information signs.



Communication Strategy

Below is a recommended communication and outreach strategy tailored to downtown Kalispell’s parking changes. The strategy is designed to clearly explain why the parking program is being updated, outline how it will operate, give businesses and residents channels for feedback, and support ongoing, data-driven adjustments.

Craft and Simplify the Message

Communications should begin by clearly defining the parking changes and explaining the rationale behind them. Studies on the impact of parking programs highlight that confusion and poor messaging can cause backlashes—even when new parking fees or time limits are low. Start by articulating that the primary goal is to revitalize downtown, encouraging customers to shop and dine locally. Break the changes into straightforward bullet points, including:

New time limits and fee structures (e.g., 90-minute parking zones, fines).

Locations affected (Main Street, Valley Bank lot, 1st Ave corridors).

Benefits and intended outcomes: increased turnover near businesses, improved wayfinding, and data-driven management.

Multi-Channel Communication

A multi-channel approach helps reach different audiences. Evidence from parking communications elsewhere shows that relying on one method rarely reaches everyone and that outreach should be sustained over several months. Recommended channels include:

Dedicated Project Page: Add a "Downtown Parking Revitalization" page to the city's website detailing the purpose of changes, implementation phases, and FAQs. Include maps of new parking durations, locations of free employee lots and wayfinding signage.

Social Media & Email Alerts: Post regular updates about timelines and benefits on the city's Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts. Use email and text alerts to notify subscribed residents and employees about key milestones and reminders.

Press Outreach: Collaborate with local newspapers, radio, and TV to publish stories explaining why the changes aim to strengthen downtown commerce. Feature interviews with DKF representatives and city officials to build trust.

Print Materials: Distribute flyers, brochures, and window posters to downtown businesses that summarize changes and display QR codes linking to the project page. Provide maps and simplified explanations of new regulations at parking kiosks and community bulletin boards.

Engage Stakeholders and Community Leaders

Local business owners, employees, and community leaders can amplify messaging and foster buy-in. Host briefings and "town hall" sessions with the Downtown Kalispell Forward (DKF), the Chamber of Commerce, and neighborhood associations to explain new mandates and answer questions. Encourage businesses to share information with customers via receipts, newsletters, or signage, and to display the new wayfinding sign design as a visual reminder.

Public Engagement and Input

A successful parking program relies on public engagement and data. Public-participation research notes that understanding community needs, building trust, and inviting diverse stakeholders into the process improve compliance and outcomes. Implement:

Surveys and Online Feedback Forms: Run periodic surveys (similar to the DKF survey of downtown business owners) to gather input on parking satisfaction, time limits, and enforcement.

Public Forums and Webinars: Host in-person and virtual Q&A sessions where staff explain the program and solicit feedback. Record sessions and post them online for those unable to attend.

Pilot Period and Data Collection: Introduce new rules with a pilot period, concurrently using license-plate recognition technology to analyze occupancy and turnover. Share high-level statistics with the public to show whether parking availability improves and adjust policies accordingly.

Use Visual Aids and Clear Signage

Effective signage prevents confusion and reduces the need for enforcement. The communications plan should emphasize the new wayfinding sign provided by DKF, demonstrating how it will guide visitors to public lots and highlight free and timed spaces. Consistent graphic standards (colors, fonts, and icons) across all parking signs will reinforce the sense of place and professionalism in the historical downtown core.

Continuous Improvement and Updates

Parking needs change with economic growth, tourism, and downtown events. To stay responsive, establish a process for regular updates:

Annual or Semi-Annual Reports: Summarize occupancy data, citation trends, business feedback, and any recommended adjustments.

Adaptive Strategy: Use the data to decide whether to adjust time limits, expand employee parking, or implement pricing. Publicly share the underlying evidence to maintain transparency.

Ongoing Outreach: Update the project webpage and social-media channels whenever policies change and send targeted communications to business owners and employees. As one commentary on successful parking programs notes, continuing to communicate and test procedures, rather than implementing changes once and forgetting about them, is vital to success.

By implementing a clear, multi-channel communications plan that solicits feedback and adapts over time, the City of Kalispell and DKF can help businesses, employees, and customers understand that parking reform is part of a broader strategy to revitalize downtown. This approach addresses concerns, builds trust, and encourages active participation in shaping a vibrant 18-hour city center.

Measuring Success of Short-Term Parking Changes

Establish Baseline Perception Measures

Downtown Business and Customer Surveys (Early 2026)
Before implementing changes, conduct surveys of downtown businesses, employees and customers to capture the current perception of parking availability and convenience. Questions should ask about:

- Ease of finding a space near destinations.
- Knowledge of free or long-term lots.

- Overall satisfaction with parking and willingness to visit downtown.
  Baseline data provides a point of comparison after the new policies are implemented.

Qualitative Interviews and Focus Groups
Hold a series of listening sessions with retailers, restaurant owners, employees and frequent customers to document common frustrations or misconceptions. This qualitative feedback helps refine survey questions and messaging.
At least one focus group should include visitors from out of town to ensure signage and wayfinding meet tourist needs.

Digital Sentiment Analysis
Use social-media monitoring and review platforms (e.g., Google Maps, Yelp) to track the tone of parking-related comments over time. Recent studies show that crowdsourced online reviews and sentiment analysis can provide insights into public perception and gauge reactions to parking management strategies. Monitoring sentiment monthly will allow the City and the Downtown Kalispell Forward (DKF) to respond quickly to emerging concerns.

Compare Perception Data to Actual Conditions

Occupancy and Turnover Statistics
Utilize the proposed license-plate recognition system to collect quantitative data on how long vehicles are parked and which spaces remain underutilized. Because research indicates that there are typically four or more parking spaces per car in U.S. cities, these hard numbers can be used to demonstrate that supply is sufficient, helping to dispel misconceptions.

Parking Supply Inventory Updates
Keep an updated inventory of all on-street and off-street spaces and track any changes. Best practice guidelines emphasize that accurate counts and ongoing data collection are critical for determining whether a parking issue truly exists. Sharing supply data alongside perception results will help illustrate the difference between reality and public assumptions.

Enforcement and Citation Trends
Measure the number and distribution of citations issued before and after policy changes. A reduction in repeat violations may suggest that customers understand and respect the new regulations, while continued “hot spots” could indicate where signage or outreach needs improvement.

Gauge Economic and Behavioral Signals

Business Performance Indicators
Collaborate with downtown businesses to track sales, foot traffic and customer dwell time. If perceptions improve, businesses should see more traffic and fewer complaints about parking.

Use of Employee and Permit Lots
Monitor how many employees shift to the designated free lots after permits are eliminated and whether those spaces consistently have capacity. Under-use of these lots would signal that employees are still competing for prime customer spaces, while full employee lots could indicate successful relocation of long-term parking.

Wayfinding and Website Engagement
Track visits to the city’s parking information webpage, hits on the parking locator app and participation in

community meetings. Increased traffic to these resources suggests successful outreach and awareness of parking options.

Reporting to Council and Community

Quarterly Dashboards (2026)
Provide the City Council and DKF with quarterly reports summarizing survey findings, sentiment analysis, occupancy rates, citation trends and business feedback. Use simple graphics and maps to compare perceptions with actual conditions and identify problem areas. Share these dashboards publicly via the city website and social media to build transparency and trust.

Presentation at Mid-Year and Year-End
Schedule presentations for the July and December Council meetings to discuss progress, highlight improvements in perception, and recommend any adjustments. Emphasize metrics that show how attitudes are shifting rather than simply quoting the number of spaces or citations.

Annual Survey and Long-Term Tracking
Conduct a follow-up survey at the end of 2026 to measure changes in customer and business perceptions relative to the baseline. Repeat the survey annually thereafter to identify long-term trends. Since parking conditions and needs evolve as tenants come and go, keeping a two- to three-year update cycle ensures that policies remain responsive to downtown dynamics.

Summary

Success should be defined through improved perceptions of parking availability rather than the number of spaces. By combining baseline surveys, social-media sentiment analysis and quantitative occupancy data, Kalispell can clearly demonstrate that existing parking supply is adequate and that new policies are making it easier to find a space. Regular, transparent reporting to the Council and the public will show whether perceptions are changing and will provide evidence to refine the program over time.

Long-Term Options from Other Cities

Kalispell is not alone in grappling with downtown parking challenges. DKF suggests starting simple because our needs are basic. Over time, as economic vitality downtown improves, new solutions should be examined. Many communities have implemented innovative strategies to make parking more convenient and support downtown business activity.

DKF researched parking programs in comparable cities and identified several best practices relevant to Kalispell. These options demonstrate a wide range of parking solutions to meet the particular constraints and needs of each community. Many communities have experimented with parking solutions. Kalispell can efficiently adopt what works.

Effective downtown parking management increasingly relies on smart technology to enhance convenience, efficiency, and data-driven decision-making. Peer cities comparable to Kalispell have implemented a range of technologies – from mobile payment apps to license plate recognition systems – that are improving parking operations and user experience. Key takeaways from these communities include:

Digital Payment Systems: Mobile apps and multi-space kiosks are replacing coin-only meters, making it easier for drivers to pay and extend parking sessions via phone or credit card. This increases compliance and convenience, and can even enable new pricing models.

License Plate Recognition (LPR) Enforcement: Many cities have adopted vehicle-mounted LPR cameras to automate enforcement. These systems scan license plates and cross-check them against digital permit and payment databases in real-time, dramatically reducing labor needs while improving coverage and consistency.

Virtual Permits & Online Portals: Shifting from physical permits to license-plate-linked digital permits streamlines permit management. Modern systems allow users to apply and pay online, update vehicle information, and eliminate physical hang-tags or decals. This integrates seamlessly with LPR, as enforcement officers can verify permits by scanning plates without searching for stickers.

Real-Time Data & Analytics: Cities are using technology to collect detailed occupancy and turnover data, enabling data-driven policy adjustments. Some have installed or planned fixed sensors or LPR at garages to track usage and display available spaces on digital signs or apps. Others analyze meter and enforcement data to adjust time limits and rates to maintain optimal occupancy (~85%).

Integrated Platforms: Comprehensive parking management software (often cloud-based) now links all aspects – mobile payments, meters, LPR enforcement, permits, citations, and even waitlist and revenue tracking – into one system for efficiency and better reporting. Cities are issuing RFPs for unified platforms that can handle everything from mobile payments to automatic DMV lookups for ticket processing, reducing manual tasks and errors.

Below, we detail how five peer cities have leveraged technology in their downtown parking programs and the lessons they offer for Kalispell's multi-year plan:

Coeur d'Alene, Idaho – Mobile Payments and Plate-Based Enforcement

Coeur d'Alene (pop. 54,500) has modernized its downtown parking with a strong focus on customer-friendly payment and efficient enforcement technology:

Mobile & Kiosk Payments: The city deployed digital payment kiosks in public lots and launched a "Call-to-Park" phone system, which has since been upgraded to the ParkMobile app for pay-by-phone service. ParkMobile is now the primary payment method for downtown parking; it covers all city-managed spaces and allows drivers to pay for parking via smartphone or a toll-free number, avoiding lines at pay stations. The app and phone system were introduced to eliminate the need for coin-fed meters and give users a convenient way to start and extend sessions. Notably, parking zone numbers (ranging 1601–1634) are posted on ParkMobile signs in each lot or block, and drivers enter their zone and license plate to initiate a session.

License Plate-Based Enforcement: To complement mobile payments and digital permits, Coeur d'Alene equipped its parking enforcement team with mobile LPR technology. Parking officers use vehicles fitted with license plate recognition cameras to automate the patrol of downtown streets and lots. The LPR system (operated by the city's contractor, Diamond Parking) scans plates and cross-references them with the ParkMobile and permit databases. Enforcement officers carry handheld devices that display which plates have paid (or have valid permits) and which are in violation. This integration allows an officer to verify payment status by simply entering the vehicle's plate and zone, without manually checking a dashboard receipt. According to city officials, mobile LPR has cut enforcement labor needs by up to 75% compared to traditional

foot patrol and tire-chalking. It also improves coverage – one LPR vehicle can scan hundreds of plates per hour, increasing compliance and citation efficiency.

Digital Permitting: Coeur d'Alene's introduction of an Annual Residential Parking Pass (for local residents to get daily free parking in certain lots) was made possible by a digital system that links permits to license plates. Residents purchase the pass online or via phone, providing their license plate; no physical sticker or hang-tag is issued. The LPR system and handhelds automatically recognize permit-holders by their plates, streamlining enforcement. This not only reduces administrative overhead (no need to print/distribute permits) but also prevents pass sharing or misuse. Diamond Parking's backend "PermitPoint" system manages these e-permits and handles online sales and renewals.

Outcomes and Lessons: Coeur d'Alene's tech-forward approach has significantly improved the parking experience. The ParkMobile rollout, covering all 699 downtown on-street spaces and five public lots, proved popular by eliminating the hassle of feeding meters and allowing remote extensions. The city notes that making payment more convenient boosted compliance and meter revenue. A portion of new parking revenues is even dedicated to downtown beautification (e.g., sidewalk flowers), helping build public support for the program. The LPR enforcement system made operations more efficient and fair – violations are caught consistently, and staff can cover more ground with fewer personnel. Coeur d'Alene's experience suggests that a well-integrated mobile payment and LPR system can yield high compliance and reduce labor costs, while digital permits tied to plates offer convenience and prevent misuse. One lesson is the importance of clear communication: the city and Diamond Parking invested in signage and public FAQs to teach parkers how to use the new tools and ensure they enter the correct zone and plate information. Kalispell can look to Coeur d'Alene's example as it considers mobile payment options and digital permit enforcement – including the potential of contracting with a third-party operator that provides a turnkey solution (as Coeur d'Alene does with Diamond Parking).

Sandpoint, ID – Planning for Smart Parking Systems

Sandpoint (pop. ~9,000) is in the early stages of implementing a modern parking system, as outlined in its Downtown Parking Management Plan (June 2025). Though many upgrades are still in planning, Sandpoint's strategy is notable for how it leverages technology to support a transition from free parking to a paid, managed system:

Pay Stations & Mobile App: The city's plan calls for installing multi-space pay stations in high-demand parking lots and introducing a mobile payment app for both off-street and selected on-street zones. By allowing drivers to use credit cards or smartphones to pay for parking, Sandpoint aims to eliminate the inconvenience of coin-only meters and achieve better compliance with the new fees. The flexibility of an app also enables features like remote session extension (within maximum time limits) and messaging to users – tools that can reduce overtime violations and improve the user experience. The plan emphasizes that modern payment tech is a critical component to "efficient utilization of public parking" in the downtown core. (Sandpoint, like Kalispell, has historically had free parking; moving to paid parking will require user-friendly payment options to gain public acceptance.)

License Plate-Based Management: In tandem with the new paid parking program, Sandpoint will likely adopt a license plate-centric system. The 2025 plan recommends that the city use LPR or similar technology for enforcement and management, noting that implementation details will depend on the chosen vendor. A plate-based system would allow for the "per visit" passes (2-hour, 3-hour, 6-hour free allowances for locals with

permits) to be tracked across multiple lots so drivers cannot simply move their car to reset the free period. For example, a Bonner County resident pass provides 3 hours of free parking per day; with LPR, if that vehicle relocates to another downtown lot, the system will recognize the plate and know the free period was already used, ensuring consistent enforcement of time limits. Sandpoint officials understand that to enforce such a system without burdening staff, electronic monitoring is needed – hence their exploration of LPR and digital chalking tools.

Dynamic Pricing & Data Use: Sandpoint's plan explicitly mentions using dynamic pricing and occupancy targets. The city intends to adjust parking rates by season and location to maintain approximately 85% peak occupancy in prime areas. Achieving this will require collecting and analyzing parking data – likely through periodic surveys and reports from the payment system (e.g., transaction volumes) – to identify when demand is too high or too low. As the plan rolls out, Sandpoint may consider adding sensors or camera-based counts at key lots to get real-time occupancy data, enabling the city to flex rates for special events or seasonal surges. The plan doesn't specify those tools, but it does highlight the need for ongoing monitoring and adjustment using technology (e.g., analyzing where and when the new paid system succeeds or where compliance lags).

Future-Proofing with Tech: Recognizing that a small city can't afford to over-staff enforcement, Sandpoint's leaders looked to places like Coeur d'Alene and Missoula for tech solutions. The plan suggests that mobile LPR enforcement and a virtual permit platform would likely be part of the implementation, even if not detailed in the public-facing document. Additionally, the city is interested in using the parking data for broader transportation planning, such as determining when to invest in additional capacity or if shared mobility solutions are reducing parking demand. While still in the planning phase, Sandpoint's case shows how important building a tech framework is when moving to a paid parking model. For Kalispell, it underlines the need to incorporate technology (apps, LPR, data systems) from the outset when transitioning from free to managed parking, to maximize efficiency and public satisfaction.

Bozeman, MT – Gradual Tech Adoption with Emphasis on Data

Bozeman (pop. 56,000) has taken a careful approach to introducing new parking technology, phasing in tools at a pace aligned with public acceptance:

City-Branded Mobile App (ParkBZN): In 2022, Bozeman launched ParkBZN, a city-branded parking payment app developed in partnership with Passport Labs. The app enables drivers to pay for parking and extend sessions via their phones, sparing them from "digging for coins" or running out to feed a meter. ParkBZN was introduced as part of a pilot for paid parking: while downtown on-street parking remains free for the first 2 hours (as of 2026), the app is used for select zones and off-street facilities where Bozeman has instituted fees (e.g., the Bridger Park Garage after 2 free hours, or certain long-term parking areas). ParkBZN effectively "future proofs" Bozeman's system – the technology backbone for paid parking is in place, even though the city has delayed broader meter roll-out due to community concerns. The app also provides valuable features like digital receipts, parking history, and expiration reminders that improve the user experience and encourage compliance (drivers can avoid tickets by extending time remotely, within allowed limits).

Upgraded Meters & Sensors: In anticipation of eventually expanding paid parking, Bozeman has tested smart meters and sensors on a limited basis. The city converted some downtown blocks to new meters that accept credit cards and integrate with the ParkBZN app and sensor systems. For example, in one pilot, Bozeman installed in-ground sensors that detect when a vehicle is present and reset the meter when it leaves, preventing "feeding the meter" beyond time limits. These sensors also collect data on parking duration and

turnover that the city uses to evaluate demand patterns. While Bozeman hasn't widely implemented such infrastructure yet, the pilot demonstrated the potential for technology to both boost compliance and provide granular data. Bozeman's 2016 Parking Plan recommended "smart" single-head meters or kiosks with occupancy sensors and real-time communication capabilities as a Phase 2 measure if free parking became unsustainable. The groundwork laid – including ensuring any new hardware would be compatible with mobile payments and enforcement software – positions Bozeman to scale up tech quickly when needed.

License Plate Recognition & E-Chalking: To enforce time limits in a more resource-efficient way, Bozeman invested in mobile LPR enforcement units. Parking enforcement vehicles are equipped with cameras and software that read license plates and log their location and timestamp. This effectively creates a digital "chalk mark," alerting officers if a car remains beyond the allowed time on the same block. By 2020, Bozeman reported using LPR for chalking and scofflaw detection on downtown streets. This technology, similar to Coeur d'Alene's, was estimated to reduce the need for enforcement staff by allowing one officer to cover what previously required multiple personnel. It also supplies continuous occupancy data: every LPR scan doubles as a survey of which spaces are occupied, feeding a database that the Parking Division analyzes to identify peak times and locations. These data have been crucial in Bozeman's decision-making – confirming, for instance, that certain peripheral blocks remain underutilized, which supported the city's choice to hold off on broad meter installation and instead focus on permits and management first.

Integrated Management Systems: Bozeman uses a comprehensive back-end system (the T2 Flex platform) to manage permits, citations, and enforcement records. It offers an online Parking Portal where users can buy permits and pay or appeal tickets digitally. This system is integrated with the LPR enforcement: when an officer's LPR unit flags a vehicle, they can instantly see the vehicle's permit status and prior citations on a handheld device, enabling quick and informed enforcement. Moreover, Bozeman's system automatically applies the city's "rolling rule" – if a vehicle moves within the same block to circumvent the 2-hour limit, the LPR data and software logic identify that violation and issue a ticket. The city has also adopted e-citation tools (handheld printers and software) so that tickets are generated and logged digitally, simplifying record-keeping and fine collection.

Outcomes and Next Steps: Bozeman's measured adoption of technology has yielded positive results without alienating downtown stakeholders. The ParkBZN app and new meters have been well-received for their convenience, though the city reports that many users still take advantage of the free first two hours, as intended. LPR enforcement has improved turnover by making the "2-hour shuffle" more difficult, and data from LPR has provided objective evidence that, outside of peak periods, downtown Bozeman still has surplus parking within a short walk of destinations. This evidence was used to justify postponing a move to universal paid parking in 2023, addressing business owners' fears that meters might deter customers. Instead, Bozeman will rely on its tech-driven management (permits, LPR, data analysis) in the near term, and only implement broader pricing if/when the data show it's necessary. The lesson for Kalispell is that investing early in technology – even before fully utilizing it – can be a smart strategy. By having mobile payment and LPR systems in place, Bozeman is prepared to scale up to a paid model rapidly when the time comes. In the meantime, those tools are still providing benefits in enforcement efficiency and data collection.

Billings, MT – Comprehensive Smart Metering and Mobile Payments

As the largest city in Montana, Billings (pop. ~117,000) has been a pioneer in adopting parking technology, using it to manage a much larger downtown parking system:

Smart Meters & PayByPhone Integration: Billings maintains approximately 840 on-street metered spaces in its downtown, all of which are equipped with either modern single-space smart meters or covered by a mobile payment zone. In 2019, Billings began replacing its aging coin-operated meters with 150 "smart" meters that accept credit cards and are integrated with the PayByPhone system. Now, every downtown meter supports the PayByPhone app – drivers can pay via smartphone for any metered space in the city, avoiding the need for coins altogether. The PayByPhone app has been widely embraced by the public, as it allows remote payment and extension of parking sessions (within the 4-hour maximum stay) and sends reminders when time is about to expire. In fact, Billings reported thousands of users registering for PayByPhone in the first months, and the majority of downtown meter payments are now cashless. To boost support for the system, the city instituted a unique policy: a portion of the new meter revenue from the app (and credit card transactions) is earmarked for downtown beautification projects such as cleaning and public art. This initiative, along with the slogan "Go PayByPhone – help keep downtown beautiful," helped encourage adoption.

Integrated Enforcement & E-citations: Billings's Parking Division has leveraged technology to streamline enforcement of its metered and time-limited zones. Parking officers use handheld devices that sync with the meter and PayByPhone databases, so they can instantly verify if a vehicle has an active payment via its license plate or meter number. When patrolling, if an officer sees an "expired" meter, they check the PayByPhone system on their device to see if the plate (or stall) has an active mobile payment; if not, a citation can be issued. Billings was an early adopter of automated ticketing hardware – transitioning from paper ticket books to handheld electronic ticket writers that print out citations and log them in a central system. These e-citations have reduced errors and administrative work (no need to re-enter handwritten tickets), and allow for easier tracking of repeat offenses and fine payments. The city also upgraded its back-end software to interface with PayByPhone's data: when a meter expires, the system records the time and can alert officers to check that spot for a violation. This has improved citation consistency and increased turnover on key blocks.

User Information & Guidance: While Billings has not implemented real-time parking availability signs, it has focused on ensuring users have the information they need through websites and signage. The city's parking website provides clear instructions for using PayByPhone and credit-card meters, complete with screenshots and step-by-step guides. The Parking Division also coordinated with Downtown Billings to distribute informational materials and place decals on meters advertising the PayByPhone service and how to use it. This education component was key – after initial "glitches" and a learning curve (for example, heavy snow temporarily covered some solar-powered meters, and users had to adapt to new payment methods), the city reported smooth operation of the smart meters and high usage of the app. Billings's experience shows that deploying modern meters and apps can be done at scale, but it requires robust public outreach and possibly a hybrid approach (keeping multiple payment options) during the transition period.

Permits and Future Innovations: Billings also manages hundreds of monthly permits for its four downtown parking garages and various 10-hour curbside zones. These have traditionally been handled with physical hang-tags or window decals and manual enforcement. However, the city is exploring moving to virtual permits and LPR in its garages, especially after seeing other cities' successes. The newest garage (Empire Garage, opened in 2014) already features advanced access control and could be a candidate for LPR-based entry/exit in the future. Billings is also monitoring the performance of its meter system; if it observes certain areas with consistently low usage, it may adjust meter placement or experiment with lower off-peak rates. While not yet truly "dynamic" pricing, the city's progressive rate structure (which increases the hourly cost the longer one parks) is a basic form of demand management. The lesson from Billings for Kalispell is that embracing multiple

convenient payment methods (coins, cards, apps) can dramatically improve user satisfaction and compliance. Additionally, integrating those payment systems with enforcement software (and eventually LPR) achieves a more efficient operation where data is centrally gathered – useful for analyzing parking patterns and making policy adjustments.

Missoula, MT – Comprehensive Smart Parking Ecosystem

Missoula (pop. 75,000) stands out as a regional leader in parking technology integration, operating a cohesive ecosystem that touches all aspects of parking:

Pay-by-Plate Meters & Mobile App: In 2015, Missoula's Parking Commission replaced aging coin meters with a network of Luke II multi-space pay stations and a complementary Passport Parking mobile app. The multi-space kiosks serve blocks of on-street spaces, allowing payment by credit/debit card and assigning the payment to a vehicle's license plate (drivers input their plate number at the station). The Passport app provides a parallel option: drivers can pay via smartphone without visiting a kiosk, also by entering their license plate (Missoula's system is entirely pay-by-plate, with no need to display paper receipts). The pay stations and app are fully synchronized – enforcement sees a valid session whether it was started at a kiosk or on the app. The city encourages app use with the slogan "Park, Pay, Be on Your Way!", highlighting the benefits (no need to visit a meter or return to one's car to extend time). This combination of pay-by-plate kiosks and mobile payments has made paying for parking seamless in Missoula and has kept meter compliance high. Missoula also programmed its meters and app for a graduated rate structure: the first hour is $1, but each additional hour costs more (up to $4 for 8 hours) to dissuade all-day parking onstreet. These rates can be adjusted by zone or time (with City Council approval), giving Missoula a tool for demand-based pricing if needed.

License Plate Recognition (LPR) for Enforcement: Missoula employs a sophisticated LPR system for both on-street and off-street enforcement. Parking officers on scooters are equipped with Genetec AutoVu LPR cameras and a "Patroller" tablet app that continuously scans license plates as they drive through downtown. The system automatically flags vehicles in violation: for example, if a plate has exceeded the paid time or is parked without payment, the officer's device receives an alert. The officer can then issue a citation using a connected handheld device running the T2 Mobile Enforcement app, which prints the ticket on the spot. Missoula formally adopted a policy for automated LPR enforcement in 2020, ensuring privacy and proper use of the data. The benefits have been substantial – enforcement efficiency has increased greatly (each LPR-equipped scooter can cover an area that used to require several walking officers), and compliance improved as drivers know the "electronic eye" is always on duty. The LPR system also provides a wealth of data: every scan is timestamped and recorded, allowing the Parking Commission to generate heat maps of occupancy, identify how long cars stay on each block, and even measure the turnover rate of individual spaces. Missoula uses this data to adjust policies (e.g., identifying blocks where time limits could be extended or where more loading zones are needed due to quick turnover). The city is now preparing to take LPR to the next level by replacing gated garage access with fixed LPR cameras. Under this plan (in development for the new downtown Bank Street garage), gate arms will be removed and overhead cameras will automatically record vehicles entering/exiting, enabling a "gateless" garage where users are either recognized via accounts (for monthly permits) or billed for transient use based on license plate timestamps. This would reduce maintenance costs (no gate equipment), speed up entry/exit, and provide precise occupancy counts in real time.

Unified Permit & Citation Management: Missoula's systems are tightly integrated. The Parking Commission uses T2's Flex software for permit and citation management (though it issued an RFP in 2025 for a next-

generation, cloud-based system to further enhance capabilities). All downtown permits – monthly leases, residential parking permits around the University District, event permits, etc. – are managed as virtual permits linked to license plates in the system. Customers can apply for permits via forms on the city website or in person, and staff input their details into the system. The goal, however, is to move to a more self-service model: Missoula's RFP requests a solution that allows customers to apply, pay, and manage their permits through an online portal or app, including updating their own license plate info and seeing permit status in real time. On the enforcement side, the integration means that when LPR or an officer checks a plate, they instantly know if the vehicle has a valid permit or not – no need to look for physical stickers or hang-tags. Citation issuance is similarly connected: once a ticket is written via the mobile app, it populates the central database and can be paid online by the vehicle owner (Missoula's public-facing Parking Portal lets users view and pay citations online, and even see photos of the violation). Moreover, Missoula automated parts of its ticket processing: its system batches unpaid citation data, interfaces with DMV databases to get owner information, and even works with a mailing service to send out notices – tasks that Kalispell currently does manually but could digitize in the future.

Customer Guidance & Transparency: Missoula is moving toward providing real-time parking information to the public. As part of its plan to upgrade garages with LPR, the city intends to install digital occupancy signs at garage entrances showing available spaces. This is expected to reduce circling and frustration, especially during events. Even without the signs, Missoula's strategy of offering the first hour free in garages (with clearly posted pricing thereafter) nudges longer stays into garages and shorter stays to curb spaces, effectively managing congestion. Missoula also shares data with the public and stakeholders: for instance, the 2023 Walker parking study results (showing exact occupancy percentages) were used in community meetings to discuss the need for rate adjustments and expansions. By leveraging technology for both operational needs and public information, Missoula has built a high-performance parking system that enjoys broad support. The city's experience suggests that investing in an integrated, tech-driven approach yields dividends in efficiency, compliance, and user satisfaction – a model that Kalispell can emulate as it modernizes its own parking services.

EACH OF THESE CITIES demonstrate how technology can address specific parking challenges. Coeur d'Alene and Billings show the importance of convenient payment options – when it's easy to pay (by app or card), drivers are more willing to follow the rules, boosting compliance and revenue. Sandpoint's plans highlight using technology from the ground up to implement paid parking with minimal friction. Bozeman's measured approach illustrates that even without citywide meters, investment in LPR and apps provides valuable data and flexibility for the future, allowing the city to be ready when demand warrants more aggressive measures. Missoula's example proves the power of a fully integrated system: pay-by-plate infrastructure combined with LPR and digital permits creates a smooth experience for users and a goldmine of information for planners.

For Kalispell, these lessons underscore that modernizing parking is not simply about pouring concrete for new lots – it's about "smart parking" solutions. As the Downtown Plan is implemented, Kalispell can leverage technology in numerous ways:

Adopting a mobile payment app (like ParkMobile, Passport, or PayByPhone) to allow easy payment and extensions, perhaps in combination with new multi-space pay stations if curbside paid parking is introduced.

Implementing license plate-based permitting and enforcement – e.g., using LPR-equipped vehicles for efficient time-limit enforcement and tying the proposed employee permits to plates rather than physical decals.

Utilizing a centralized parking management software that integrates permits, payments, and enforcement (much like Missoula's or Bozeman's systems) and provides reporting dashboards. This would enable Kalispell's parking managers to monitor occupancy trends, identify hotspots, and adjust policies (time limits, permit allocations, or rates) based on real data.

Exploring gateless entry technology for any future parking structures (as an alternative to traditional gate arms), as well as electronic counters or sensors in larger lots to monitor usage in real time.

Ensuring robust public communication and signage accompanies any tech rollout – including clear instructions for new apps or kiosks, and possibly dynamic signage to guide drivers to available parking (taking a cue from Bend, OR's digital guidance system and Missoula's planned garage signs).

By learning from peer cities, Downtown Kalispell's multi-year plan can incorporate the right mix of technologies from the outset. This will not only improve the day-to-day efficiency of parking operations (doing more with limited staff through automation), but also enhance the user experience for downtown visitors (making parking "smarter" and more convenient). In turn, these improvements support the broader goals of the Downtown Forward initiative: a vibrant, accessible downtown where parking is well-managed and no longer perceived as a barrier to economic activity.

Funding and Implementation Considerations

Implementing the above recommendations will require investment in signage, enforcement technology and outreach. Potential funding sources include:

- The Kalispell Business Improvement District (KBID) and Downtown Urban Renewal Agency, which can allocate tax increment revenue for signage and parking improvements.
- Montana Department of Transportation or Federal Highway Administration grants for downtown revitalization and transportation demand management.
- Partnerships with local banks (e.g., Valley Bank) and property owners to co-fund improvements on their premises.
- A nominal fee structure for weekend lot leases to non-profit event organizers.
- DKF recommends that the City Council authorize staff to pursue these funding sources and create a phased implementation plan, beginning with signage and free parking conversions in 2026, followed by the acquisition and deployment of LPR software.

Looking further ahead, capacity enhancements are on the horizon. The public/private Charles Hotel parking garage by 2029 will add 240+ spaces, and potentially set the stage for additional mixed-use parking facilities in the future. The City will also keep an eye on parking demand growth – if downtown development accelerates, further steps like a second garage or smart parking meters might be considered (with careful stakeholder consultation, as Bozeman's experience shows). Throughout all phases, the DKF coalition and City leaders are committed to leveraging best practices and funding opportunities – from TIF to grants – to ensure that downtown parking improvements remain financially feasible.

By following this comprehensive, phased plan, Downtown Kalispell can create a parking system that meets current needs and supports future growth. The ultimate vision is a downtown where parking is convenient and well-managed – so that residents, employees, and visitors can easily access local businesses and attractions.

With improved parking supply, clearer information, and continued investment, downtown Kalispell will be well-positioned to thrive as a vibrant destination for years to come.

Conclusion

Revitalizing Downtown Kalispell requires a strategic approach to parking that improves convenience, supports businesses and provides a foundation for long-term growth. This report has presented evidence that convenient, well-managed parking drives retail activity and fosters a vibrant community. By implementing the recommended actions—including 90-minute time limits, modern enforcement technology, unified signage and dynamic management—the City Council can turn parking from a perceived obstacle into an engine for economic vitality. Flexibility will be crucial; as downtown grows, the city should monitor usage data and adjust policies accordingly. With proactive planning and community engagement, parking can help Kalispell realize its vision of an 18-hour downtown where people live, work, visit, shop and socialize.

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