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Examiner

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Mechanized parking gaining local foothold

By Allan Classen

Just when it seems Portland's parking problems couldn't get worse, a mechanized solution is emerging that could overcome some cost and space limitations driving developers to provide few if any off-street parking for their residents.

The Janey at 1155 NW Everett St. is the first Westside building to use mechanized or semi-automatic parking, and the Benevento under construction at Northwest 23rd and Raleigh will be the second. Two Eastside buildings were the first in the city. All four projects have systems supplied by Harding Steel that allow drivers to park and retrieve their vehicles without the need for an attendant.

The Janey's 25-car system has turned parking from an eyesore to be hidden into an attraction worthy of large windows along the sidewalk, where passersby are often seen watching cars move up and down its three tiers.

The system takes the surface space of nine parking stalls, almost tripling the capacity and saving substantially from the cost of a conventional parking structure.

Whether this technology was a factor or not, all but 10 of The Janey's 50 housing units were leased within three months of opening, said property manager Aimee Calley. She believes most residents consider the parking system a positive feature, or at least not a negative one, in choosing where to live.

"What's happening in Portland is notable," said Ryan Meyers of Harding Steel, referring to the spate of mechanized parking systems his company has installed here in the past year. "We haven't seen such a concentration in an area so small."

"I think it's an excellent solution for urban density and livability," said Jack Menashé, whose company developed the Albert apartments on North Williams Avenue, which has a 17-car mechanized parking system.

The Benevento, a 24-unit apartment building, will have a 17-car system in the space of six conventional stalls.

"So far in, it has been pretty well received," said Tom DiChiara of C.E. John Co., developer of the Benevento. "I think our residents will think it's pretty cool. Anything we can do as developers to lessen the impact car storage

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has on our buildings is a good thing.

"The main reason we are using the system is space. On a small, quarter-block site like Benevento and Janey, trying to put parking underground is very inefficient and therefore very expensive. There simply isn't enough room for ramps, elevators, stairs, etc., on a 10,000-square-foot site and still have enough room for actual parking stalls.

"Consequently the costs per stall get very high, up to \$50,000 per stall in many cases. ... The mechanized parking system by Harding Steel that we are using, in comparison, costs about \$15,000 per stall for the equipment, plus the costs of building the room around it, so figure around \$20,000 to \$22,000 per stall."

There are other advantages, particularly for smaller sites.

"The system is much more compact than typical self-parked garages," DiChiara said, "which leaves more room for ground-floor retail space and other more interesting ground floor uses."

The comparison figures cited by DiChiara are more favorable than the averages touted by Denver-based Harding Steel. Meyers, son of the company's president, said mechanized parking can reduce both the space needed for parking and construction costs by roughly 30 percent.

Harding Steel has also equipped the Mirabella in the South Waterfront with a stacking system that allows two cars to park in the footprint of one, but Meyers

called that an older and more limited technology. The bottom car has to be driven out of its space to access the top vehicle.

Although Harding has built systems storing up to 640 cars, there are practical limits to size, particularly in dense neighborhoods. Because it can take 2-3 minutes to retrieve or park a vehicle, there may be a considerable wait when many drivers are leaving or returning at the same time. At the end of the day, that means there must be space for drivers to park while waiting their turn.

"Big projects in tight spots are a problem," said Meyers. "We've been able to combat that by using smaller installations and by adding more retrieval units."

"It takes a little longer to get your car in and out than a standard garage," said DiChiara. "I would be nervous about using it for a large apartment community where many people need their cars all at once. The queuing could be a problem in that instance."

"It works best on a small scale, especially at locations where folks may not be using their car every day (like most close-in locations)."

But Menashe said the waiting problem isn't as severe as some believe. With his three-tiered system, one-third of the cars are at ground level and can be accessed in 15 seconds. Cars from the other levels can be retrieved in 90-150 seconds.

Still, the rate of adoption falls short of



The automated parking system at The Janey can store 25 cars in the floor space of nine. It's the third such system in Portland. All were built by Denver-based Harding Steel.

claims on Harding Steel's website.

"By the year 2010, mechanical parking systems will become the accepted way to 'create more land,'" wrote Phil Harding. "Parking machine specifications will be in the files of leading architects. Mechanical systems will be used to: 1) clean up the environment, 2) utilize costly land more efficiently, 3) solve aesthetic problems caused by parked cars and 4) generate additional income, thus giving property owners higher yields and greater choices for land

usage."

Sam Rodriguez of Mill Creek Residential Development, the other leading Westside developer now, has not gone with mechanized parking so far. While recognizing it can save money on underground installations and it may be the best option for small sites, his projects have been somewhat larger.

He also fears some unknowns.

"I'm a little skeptical of what happens at 7 a.m. when everyone wants to get out at

the same time?" he asked. "What happens when the power goes out?"

Rodriguez noted that a fail-safe maintenance system must be in place, with service crews ready to respond immediately day or night.

For larger parking structures, robotic systems exist that can handle thousands of vehicles, but so far they have been feasible only in the densest cities. Might such a facility be practical in the Con-way master plan area centered around Northwest

21st and Raleigh, where up to up to 10 200x200-foot blocks have been designated for a continuous underground parking structure?

Craig Boretz, who oversees development of the company's sprawling acreage, is keeping an eye on new parking technology. "Time will tell if there is 'customer' acceptance," said Boretz. "I personally like the idea and have seen The Janey parking in action. It's cool."

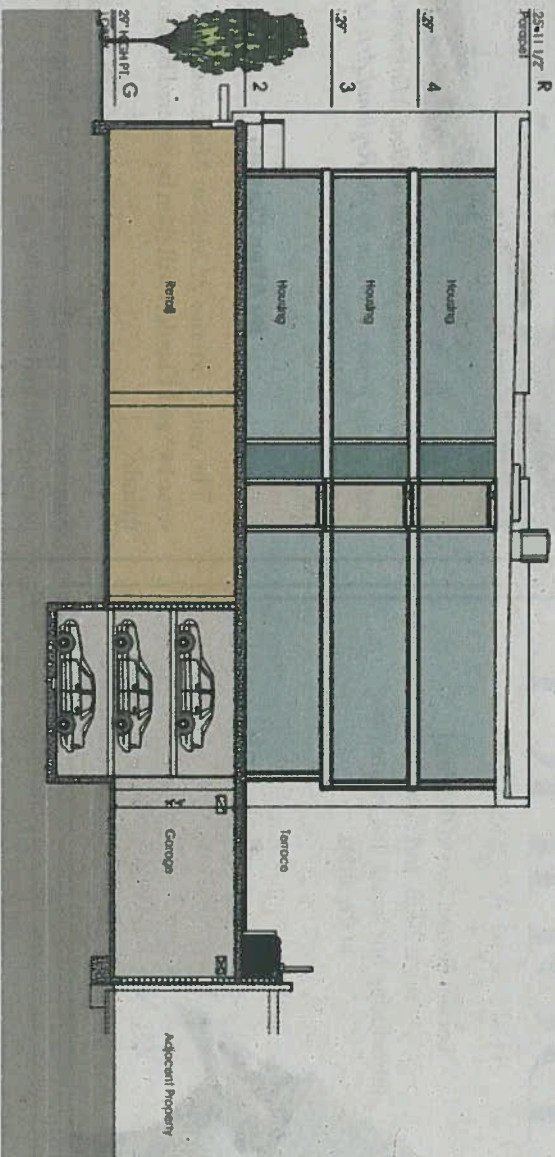
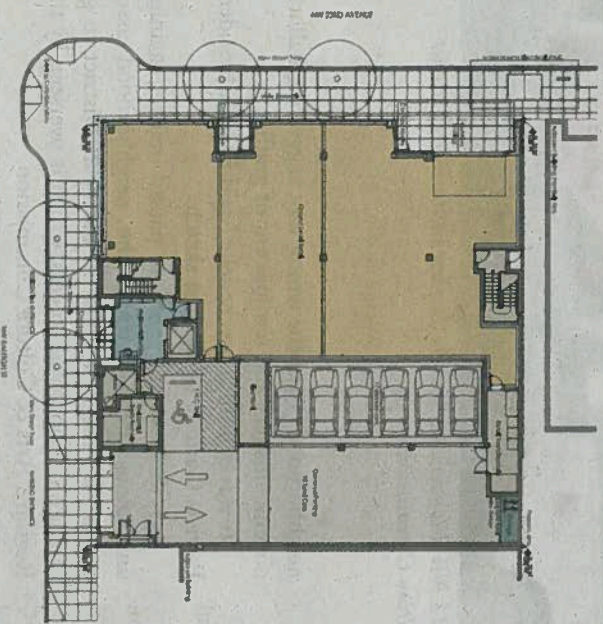
"It is probably not a large-scale solution

as yet," he added while noting Con-way development partners will decide what type of systems to install.

Rodriguez said there are too many unknowns regarding Con-way's underground parking, which is to have shared rather than reserved spaces and is primarily for the company's own employees. Residential and retail developments may still be on their own in providing off-street parking.

"I'm all in favor of parking solutions

that reduce cost and the space needed for automobile storage," said Northwest District Association President Ron Walters, a key participant in developing the Con-way master plan. "It opens up the possibility of developers putting their money into other priorities that improve quality of life in the neighborhood. Also, it may help developers provide more, affordable on-site parking, which might ameliorate the problem caused by no parking minimums."



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The parking system at the Benevento will store 17 cars on three levels in a space compact enough to allow ample ground-floor retail space along the front of the building.