

purse snatchers, and car thieves. Call it pure, drive-by convenience and efficiency.

Among other things, parking facilities have begun using computerized license plate readers or "smart cards," which are placed on the inside of a car's windshield and which can be read by a radio signal from several feet away. The readers and cards can be used to allow or deny entrance or exit, without human intervention. They also can be linked to computerized payment systems that bill the driver's debit card or place the parking fee on his credit-card bill. No more fumbling around for dollar bills and coins. In fact, drivers don't even have to stop as they drive past the payment booth.

"The two main objectives in the parking business today are moving cars in and out at a fast clip, and minimizing revenue shrinkage," says Rick Rich of Rich & Associates, a parking consulting firm. "Shrinkage" is an industry euphemism for employees' stealing from the cash register. Eliminating cashiers will, of course, greatly reduce the opportunities for shrinkage.

Parking facilities also are installing sensors that tell managers which spaces are available at any given time. That information can be fed to traffic-management systems that direct drivers to openings. No more meandering, time-wasting searches. Data about whether spaces are open in a garage eventually will make their way to drivers on the road, perhaps through their wireless personal digital assistants or cellular phones.

As cameras become less expensive, facilities are installing

more of them to ensure that drivers aren't speeding and terrorizing pedestrians, that muggers aren't skulking about, and that exits aren't blocked.

At a new, 11,500-space facility being built at the Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport in Michigan, for instance,

computer-driven cameras will monitor traffic flows, accident clean-ups, and other developments. Changeable message billboards will alert incoming drivers to open parking spaces. For good measure, travelers will be able to check their baggage in the new parking facility and head straight for their plane's departure gate, thanks to an army of skycaps, a high-speed conveyor-belt system, and a computerized system for processing claim checks.

"More and more, we're seeing these things demanded by the traveling public, especially as they become more aware of new technology and how it can be applied to everyday situations," says Linn Day, the director of properties, planning, and facilities at the Detroit airport.

Technology isn't cheap. The Hoboken Parking Authority is spending \$6.2 million on its new facility. Electronic ticket-taking or traffic-guidance systems can start at \$10,000 and quickly run up to \$200,000 and more.

Still, industry experts say those expenses can be covered in as little as nine months, and raise margins in an already lucrative business as much as 10 percentage points.

"The technology is getting better all the time, so when you look at a facility—especially the

Sensors know which spaces are open and can feed drivers the information. No more slow, time-wasting searches.

larger ones with 500 spaces and up—[a system like the one in Hoboken] becomes a very cost-effective way to conduct business," says Don Monahan, a principal with Walker Parking Consultants.

Robotic Parking, which is building the Hoboken facility, is planning to construct facilities using the same technology in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and several other U.S. cities in the next few years.

Gerhard Haag, founder of Robotic Parking, says: "The bottom line is that there are better economics, better security, and better customer service."

What is down the road? More of everything we are seeing today: automated garages, cash-free transactions, more spaces being built on less ground, and so on. And just wait until cars hit the market equipped with Internet-access features in the dashboard. The information superhighway may not just speed our lives along; it may come with parking, too. 🚗

Diddlebock, a Denver-based writer and editor, has been driving up and down the information superhighway for the last 10 years without finding a permanent place to park. He can be reached at diddlebock@pcisys.net.

ILLUSTRATION
DAVID SHELDON