



A recent visitor to Theta Dempsey's third floor office in Robertson Hall explained that she might have to interrupt their conversation to run downstairs and plug the meter. "That's OK," Dempsey deadpanned, "I understand."

You bet she does. As administrator of parking and transit services for the University of Oklahoma, Dempsey appreciates the challenges of OU campus traffic better than anyone. A former high school drama coach, Dempsey now channels her energy and creativity into helping students, faculty, staff and visitors maneuver as close as is humanly possible to their desired campus destinations.

"Any time you are dealing with high demand and limited resources, creativity certainly helps," Dempsey laughs. Throughout her 16 years in the department, she has found that a sense of humor does not hurt either.

Long before OU parking permits hung from rear view mirrors, the University issued bumper decals. The decals had to be removed and returned to the parking office for replacement in the event a car was sold or totaled. During the 1980s Dempsey was working at the front desk when a woman came in carrying an entire rear bumper and thrust it over the counter. "Here's the sticker," said the woman. "You scrape it off!"

Dempsey also recalls the freshman who repeatedly parked in the same unauthorized spot, accumulating tickets like restaurant fliers on game days. The third time the car was impounded, Dempsey invited the student up to her office to discuss the situation.

"She explained to me that she knew it was a violation, but that she would continue to park there so her cellular phone antennae would not be stolen." By the end of year, the recalcitrant coed could have bought another car with what she paid in fines.

"One of our biggest challenges is letting people know what resources we have available and how to use them to their best advantage," explains Dempsey. "People don't

always utilize the system as efficiently as they might."

With 13,000 parking permit holders vying for 8,000 restricted spots, a certain degree of frustration is unavoidable, but fortunately, Dempsey says, not all campus drivers converge on campus at the same time. The requirements of a student with a Monday, Wednesday, Friday schedule will differ greatly from a student with a single night class.

Dempsey and her staff continually research and evaluate the ever-changing needs of those using campus parking. During peak hours, students may find it easier not to park on

the main campus at all, but take advantage of the free park-and-ride shuttle service from the Lloyd Noble Center. Each weekday buses leave for the main campus every 10 minutes from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. and every 15 minutes from 3 to 6 p.m.

"Not many universities have been able to hang on to this type of free service. We are very proud of that," says Dempsey. "No student *has* to pay to park."

Yet every fall, hundreds do, plunking down \$92 for a two-semester permit to park in restricted campus lots with an additional \$13 for the summer. Even though fees have increased over the years, OU still has one of the lowest university parking rates in the nation. Dempsey still is amused when incoming faculty are told the cost of the parking permit and assume it is a monthly rate, not an annual one. Still there are those who compare the permit to a hunting license. It gives its owners the right to pursue; it does not guarantee them a catch.

Dempsey and staff are working on that. In 1988, the University took a serious look at existing parking

problems and began an extensive campaign of resurfacing, lighting and layout, which continues today. Creating additional parking spaces in prime locations became a top priority.

Since 1993, OU has gained approximately 800 parking spots, including 579 in the multi-storied Elm Avenue parking facility, adjacent to Catlett Music Center, across from the Rupel Jones Theater. Implementation of short-term meter



Robert Taylor

As the administrator in the middle of OU's campus parking problem, Theta Dempsey maintains her sanity by keeping the dilemma in perspective and her sense of humor intact.





Theta Dempsey, right, encourages commuters and other students, faculty, staff and visitors to park free at Lloyd Noble Center and hop on the trolleys and buses for the quick trip to the campus CART stops. Driving for this photo op is the manager of transit operations, Howard Cremeans.

parking near the bookstore and the financial aid office has facilitated higher turnover and greater availability of parking in high volume areas. Dempsey lauds OU administrators for their support in identifying potential parking sites and working out funding solutions.

A mass transit system known as CART (Cleveland Area Rapid Transit) was implemented in the early '80s to reduce the number of students driving to campus. Now a joint venture of the University with the city of Norman, the Federal Transit Administration and the state of Oklahoma, CART transports 800,000 riders annually with routes throughout Norman and the Oklahoma City area.

To better serve its increasingly computer-savvy consumers, Dempsey's office now offers a web site ([www.ou.edu/parking](http://www.ou.edu/parking)). The site not only provides information on parking and bus routes, but also offers customers an on-line appeals process and a forum for reporting maintenance problems, such as insufficient lighting or faulty meters. By next year, Dempsey expects to offer an on-line application service that will allow students, faculty and staff to purchase permits from the comfort of their computer terminals.

Long before the fall semester arrives, Dempsey and her staff are geared up for the thousands of visitors who test the limits of OU parking on any given game day. For those

making the weekend pigskin pilgrimage, Dempsey offers a few insider's tips. "People who don't know Norman well can get stuck an hour and a half in traffic just looking for a place near the stadium. If you're coming from out of town, you're better off parking at Lloyd Noble and taking advantage of the shuttle service."

And for the locals, "They might want to try the Elm Street parking facility. It's never yet filled up on a game day. And, as always, people with current OU parking permits can park without paying an additional fee."

Dempsey encourages students who are looking for part-time jobs to apply at the parking office. For football game days, the parking and transit staff swells from approximately 50 to more than 100 in order to accommodate Sooner fans. "We love having students work for us," Dempsey says. "They know the campus better than anyone and are very helpful in giving directions."

If current trends hold steady, the next decade will continue to challenge parking resources of college campuses nationwide. For better or worse, Dempsey says, we live in a society where people expect to get in their cars and drive within a few feet of their destination. Until that changes, Dempsey's creativity—and her sense of humor—will be put to the test.

— LYNETTE LOBBAN