

Where Should We Park All These Trucks?

Imagine you're looking for a parking space and if you don't find one soon, you could be fined or maybe even risk losing your job. And by the way, your car is 70 feet long and it's illegal to park it on your community's public streets.

That's the plight of today's tractor-trailer driver. Truck parking is a growing issue in communities across the nation, but it's particularly relevant in the Lehigh Valley, which sits at the epicenter of one of the nation's busiest warehouse and logistics corridors.

While communities race to pass laws designed to rid their streets of idle trucks they argue are loud, unsightly, pollution-causers, truck drivers trying to contend with new restrictions are lobbying for more places to park and rest.

"You know you have to stop and find a place soon, but you know there's no place available close," said Bob Dolan, a 40-year truck driver from Catasauqua. "It's sometimes nerve-racking. It's become a big issue."

Truck parking has been an increasing problem for several years, as the e-commerce boom has created the need to move more consumer goods by truck and more communities are outlawing parking trucks on their public streets. However, the issue was enflamed in December of 2017, when new federal laws required the electronic tracking of the hours truckers are on the road.

Federal laws limit truck drivers to a daily 14-hour, on-duty shift and only 11 of that can be behind the wheel. Additionally, the driver must take a 30-minute break during their first eight hours of driving. Violating the law can bring fines, increased insurance costs for the company and potential termination for the driver.

"There's no more fudging the paper logs," said David C. Torrey, a retired trucker and transportation manager who is a member of the Lehigh Valley Traffic Club. "If you're out of hours or due for a break, you better find a place fast. It's really a miserable time to be a trucker."

Finding a place fast is no small task. In a 2018 survey by the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission, 35% of responding truckers said they spent more than 31 minutes per day looking for a place to park for their 10-hour break. And 42% said they often park in unauthorized locations, such as ramps and road shoulders.

As a result, a review of six turnpike rest areas showed that, on a typical night, 195 trucks park in rest areas that have a collective 93 official spaces.

"Drivers have to decide "Do I park illegally or drive illegally? And you better not drive illegally," said Kevin Stewart, President of the Pennsylvania Motor Vehicle Association. "It puts them in a tough spot."

Solutions are being proposed from a variety of sources, but there's no one-size-fits all answer. Last year, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety regulations were relaxed to allow truckers, who after

unloading have been forced from a facility, the time to make it to the next available parking area, even if they're against their hours requirements, Stewart said.

The Turnpike Commission is adding spots at rest areas where there is room and is considering road signs that would let truckers know where spots are available, but that doesn't deal with the issue on the rest of the state's roads.

In November, PennDOT sent private companies a request for information to determine whether a public private partnership could help increase capacity or use technology to make the existing spaces more available.

"It's complicated from any angle," said Mike Rimer, PennDOT's Transportation Planning Specialist Supervisor. "Every solution has an obstacle, whether it be funding or land use issues or politics. We're trying to determine if there is an opportunity to partner with the private sector."

Meanwhile, municipalities with warehouses have already begun to legislate changes requiring developers of large facilities to add truck parking spaces and lounges for drivers.

"At the end of the day, it's going to take a public and private partnership to tackle this problem," said Becky Bradley, LVPC Executive Director. "It's going to take municipal governments, the Turnpike and Toll Bridge commissions, as well as end users at private facilities, gas stations and rest stops."

Experts said potential solutions include:

- Model ordinances such as those in Lower Macungie and South Whitehall Township, that not only restrict where trucks can be parked, but also require expanded parking and staging areas. Lower Macungie Township, in 2017, updated its zoning ordinance to require that warehouses with more than 30 truck bays include overflow truck waiting areas and lounges for drivers.
- Destination facilities making spaces available where truckers can rest. Wawa on Route 100, Walmart on Route 248 and the Lehigh Valley International Airport have all carved out some room for truckers.
- Better warehousing and distribution facility design. Large facilities can be built to include resting spaces and truckers lounges that allow drivers a place to shower and in some cases eat. Many current facilities that receive trucks don't allow drivers to park before or after making their delivery.
- Technology to help trucks find their way to the next space. Some states have installed variable message boards on highways, telling truckers where spaces are available at rest stops, and others have apps guiding them to available parking.
- The use of vacant parcels, such as closed or under-utilized retail centers, for truck parking until they can be repurposed for another use.

It's not an issue that will be solved anytime soon in the Lehigh Valley. The region has added nearly 40 million square feet of warehouse and logistics space over the past decade, and another nearly 12 million square feet have been proposed, but not yet built. The LVPC's MoveLV freight plan in 2015 forecast that annual truck freight in the region would double to more than 80 million tons by 2040.

“We’ve all chosen this new retail landscape by doing our shopping on our smartphones,” Bradley said. “We’re going to have to work together to deal with the impact on our infrastructure.”