Eliminate Off-Street Parking Minimums

Changing parking minimums, especially in locations close to public transit, can encourage more sustainable transportation.

(Photo courtesy of Planetizen)

The Impact

Parking minimums, the local zoning laws that require private businesses and residences to provide at least a certain number of off-street parking spaces, contribute to the overreliance on cars as the primary form of transportation in American communities. With fewer parking spaces, there's a greater incentive for people to use public transit, walk, or cycle. This can lead to improved public transit systems and more investments in pedestrian and cycling infrastructure

Moreover, without the need to provide a minimum number of parking spaces, developers can save on construction costs. This can potentially lower housing prices and encourage more diverse types of development. This market-based approach encourages other forms of transportation, such as transit, walking and biking, prompting residents to get out of their cars and get around their communities in more sustainable ways that reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT), traffic congestion and harmful greenhouse gas emissions.

Description

In many cities, current zoning codes require private businesses and residences to provide a minimum number of off-street parking spaces. This number varies by the type and size of the development (for example, two parking spaces per apartment unit).

Planning commissions and city councils can enact changes to local zoning laws to strike parking minimums. These changes can be as simple as making them apply to all commercial and residential developments in the jurisdiction, or as complex as having them apply to only buildings within a certain distance (such as 500 feet) of frequent public transit service.

Where It's Been Implemented

Hartford, Conn., is a well-known example of a city that successfully eliminated its parking minimums. In 2014, the city realized that "free parking" in downtown Hartford cost the city $50 million annually in lost tax revenues because the parking consumed so much land. Hartford revised its zoning codes to allow developers to build new projects without any legal parking requirements. As a result of this policy change, it became easier for developers to renovate downtown buildings, thus improving the overall quality of their community. City officials expect this reform will continue to lower housing costs, reduce traffic and lessen harmful runoff.

Another example is Sandpoint, Idaho. In 2009, the City Council took steps to eliminate off-street parking requirements in the downtown area. As a result, many local businesses avoided being demolished for the construction of new parking structures, and millions of dollars have been invested in new developments. Many jobs, renovations and expansions by local businesses would not have been possible without this policy change. This change ended up creating a more vibrant and walkable community, leading Sandpoint to eliminate off-street parking requirements throughout the rest of the city in 2018.

After learning that constructing a single parking space costs between $30,000 to $100,000 in their city, depending on the location, San Jose City Council members voted unanimously in June 2022 to create a policy to eliminate the city's minimum parking requirements for new developments and incentivize alternative modes of transportation, like biking and public transit.

Parking reform is starting to gain steam on a larger scale. In California, the governor signed AB 2097 in 2022, a law that prohibits cities from imposing minimum parking requirements on most projects located within half a mile of a major transit stop. This policy essentially eliminates minimum parking mandates in locales when other viable non-auto transit modes are available.

Key Drivers

UCLA Professor Donald Shoup says parking is one of the largest government subsidies for Americans. He estimated the value of the national free-parking subsidy to cars was between $127 billion and $374 billion in 2002.

Parking minimums force developers to pay these costs to create enough spaces or face having to pay tens of thousands of dollars per missing spot in in-lieu fees. In-lieu fees are fees that developers pay into a municipal parking or traffic mitigation fund instead of providing the required parking. These costs are often passed on to consumers and might even prevent new developments. In 2016 a study found that parking minimums added $1,700 a year in rent to the average American tenant. Everyone ends up paying for the parking spaces, even if they do not drive.

Many cities have an excess of available parking spaces. In September 2022, the GreenTrip parking database maintained by TransForm showed that across 80 parking sites in the San Francisco Bay Area, 28% of spaces were unused. These unused spaces equal $198 million in construction costs. This parking surplus encourages more driving rather than less because people can park easily at no cost. As more people are incentivized to use cars to travel, community leaders feel compelled to build more streets and parking lots — a vicious cycle. As a result, many American communities are

excessively spread out and unwalkable. Parking minimums encourage driving, even in communities that are working to reduce transportation emissions.

Key Factors for Success

It is crucial to have an on-street management plan in place when eliminating parking minimums. Maintaining free parking without any demand-responsive pricing mechanisms can lead developers to take advantage of these government-subsidized parking spaces. Doing so can create friction between existing residents and developers seeking new buildings, as they will compete over limited free parking, and it will disincentivize private sector development of parking in response to market need.

Another factor for success is easy access to well-functioning, integrated public transit, or the potential for more transit options to be easily created. Reduced parking spaces can spur the development of more public transit infrastructure, and some existing groundwork can help this policy to be widely accepted.

It may make sense in some situations to start by eliminating parking minimums in downtown regions, then expanding the regulation citywide for all uses. Starting in a location that might have more access to public transit can better illustrate the positive effects of eliminating parking minimums. As positive data is gathered from the implementation of this policy in denser areas, it may become politically easier to expand it citywide.

Key Obstacles

Eliminating parking minimums may elicit a knee-jerk reaction from community members who fear that the amount of available parking spaces will drastically decline and that they will no longer be able to drive anywhere. To overcome this issue, cities need to engage community members and show them that these changes will result in positive effects for all parties involved. For example, when savings are invested in public transportation, more residents will have a true alternative that is cost-effective, safe, fast, reliable and convenient.

References and Resources

- Ramses Madou, San Jose Department of Transportation, ramses.madou@sanjoseca.gov
- StrongTowns.org. More Cities Than Ever Are Removing Parking Minimums (with map)
- StrongTowns.org. “One Line of Your Zoning Code Can Make a World of Difference”
- (about Sandpoint, Idaho’s experience)
- Donald Shoup. Cutting the Cost of Parking Requirements
- Donald Shoup. Parking Reform Will Save the City
- Slate. San Francisco Eliminates Parking Minimums
- StreetsBlog. “Hartford Eliminates Parking Minimums Citywide”
- Santa Rosa, Calif. Progressive Parking Management Strategy Report
- TransFormCA.org. GreenTrip parking database
- ReinventingParking.org. Demand-responsive parking price setting

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