



PARKING POLICY REFORM

Implications for Municipalities

Parking policies are typically codified through local zoning. Once adopted, the policies are administered by city staff and rarely revisited. This approach results in most communities operating under a set of legacy parking ratios that fail to respond to actual supply and demand, changing mobility preferences, and market conditions.

Traditional policies assume that parking should be abundant and free; parking reform, however, recognizes that too much parking can be harmful, and that parking should be managed and priced for efficiency. In response, most jurisdictions are encouraging more efficient parking management, and many are significantly reducing or even eliminating minimum off-street parking requirements.

Implications of Parking Requirements for Municipalities



Excess parking can negatively affect the bottom line for cities: Parking often earns only 7 to 42 percent of the tax revenues earned by other land uses.¹



Municipalities bear the consequences of overabundant parking: Impermeable parking surfaces increase runoff, strain stormwater systems, and increase infrastructure maintenance costs.²



Parking requirements discourage reuse of buildings: Required parking for a new use may be difficult to provide on site. Meeting minimum parking regulations can lead to the demolition of adequate building stock, compelling developers to abandon plans when financially infeasible.

Data Collection and Public Outreach Lessons

By conducting local research ahead of public engagement and outreach efforts, cities can proactively address concerns related to parking policy reforms.

San Diego, California, understood that a common public concern related to eliminating parking minimums was that providing less off-site parking could lead to more cars looking for on-street parking, thereby increasing traffic congestion. To allay this concern, the city studied existing parking occupancy rates in “transit priority areas” and in downtown and found that most areas had fewer occupied spaces than the number of spaces required by existing parking ratios. Specifically, the study found that:

- Nearly 90 percent of study sites outside downtown had fewer occupied spaces than the number of spaces required by code; and
- Of downtown study sites, 100 percent had lower parking demand than one space per unit.

Outcomes: Parking demand data collected by the city informed the city’s successful parking policy updates and associated public outreach. In 2019, the city council voted eight to one to eliminate parking requirements for new condominium and apartment complexes in neighborhoods near mass transit. The approved policy also sets a maximum of one parking space per unit for new apartment and condominium projects downtown and requires developers to unbundle the cost of a parking spot from monthly rent or a condominium purchase price.^{3, 4, 5}

Early engagement with business associations, residents’ groups, and others can uncover (surprisingly) deep support for parking policy reforms.

Buffalo, New York, anticipated opposition to the idea of eliminating parking minimums citywide—but this opposition largely did not materialize. Instead, extensive public engagement uncovered strong support for proposed parking policy updates. The city found that:

- Public engagement surveys showed that 74 percent of people expressed strong support for repealing minimum parking requirements;
- Public comments centered on the negative impacts of the overabundance of surface parking lots and a desire to protect the walkability of existing neighborhoods; and
- The parking policy update was formally endorsed by businesses and residents’ associations, including the Elmwood Village Association (a community development organization comprising business owners and neighborhood residents), and states: “Minimum parking standards make suburban-style surface lots a requirement and would have prevented many of Elmwood’s existing great buildings from being constructed.”

Outcomes: In 2017, Buffalo eliminated parking minimums citywide because of strong support, including from business associations and residents’ groups. The city’s planning team had previously considered moving toward a less significant change but decided to repeal minimum parking requirements citywide after finding that their engagement efforts uncovered surprisingly little opposition to the policy change.⁶



¹ Chris McCahill, “SSTI researcher: ‘Parking requirements transform cities, cost millions in tax revenues,’” *State Smart Transportation Initiative*, April 1, 2014.

² City of El Paso Planning Division, Planning and Inspections Department, *Parking Reduction Report*, January 22, 2018.

³ PowerPoint presentation (sandiego.gov).

⁴ Carter Rubin, “San Diego Parking Reform Is a Win for Housing and Climate,” NRDC, March 4, 2019.

⁵ Becca Cudmore, “To Become a Less Car-Centric City, San Diego Takes Aim at Parking Lot Quotas,” NRDC, June 5, 2019.

⁶ Daniel Baldwin Hess, “Repealing minimum parking requirements in Buffalo: new directions for land use and development,” *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability* (April 2017).