

What will be the likely effect of relaxing parking requirements?

Minimum parking requirements are a standard of American land development and redevelopment. Relaxation of these requirements is a huge change not only in policy but also in thinking. It has been a long agreed upon “truth” in planning that accommodation for peak parking needs is a settled standard requirement.¹

Minimum parking requirements in most local jurisdictions means that whenever a development is planned and a building permit required, minimum parking requirements for that project are in place. A standard minimum for a typical office development is that for each 1,000 gross square feet of building, three to four parking spaces are required. Jurisdictions throughout the United States have varying requirements but surprisingly little variation exists. Requirements will vary depending on what type of development; office building, restaurant, sports arena, etc. but again little variation exists from locality to locality.²

An important factor in the provision of this parking is that in most cases the parking is free (or not an added cost) to the direct user of the parking. The existence of “free” and abundant parking has set into motion the concept that free and easy parking is a standard requirement for success in business and an inalienable right of most American drivers.

The problems highlighted by rigid minimum parking requirements are:

Cost: Averaging 350 square feet for each parking space requires a large investment in land that normally could be used for more productive use. Because these parking requirements are fairly standard an argument can be made that all land is devalued because the same parking requirements are attached to all potential developments.³

The cost of this parking is spread to all customers and clients regardless of their actual use. A customer who walks or uses mass transit still pays for the parking because it is a

fixed development cost of the initial construction and in most cases does not have a large maintenance requirement.

Environmental Impact: Parking requirements have led to huge areas being paved over with resulting loss of green space and increased water runoff and flooding potential.⁴ Easy parking has also led to increased use of automobiles and more congestion and associated air pollution. The aesthetic impact of large parking areas is one of the most obvious and universally realized negatives associated with parking. Parking lots as eyesores are something most people do not want to experience.⁵

Efficiency: Minimum parking requirements have led to an over abundance of free parking and wasteful use of resources. It is estimated that eighty percent of all parking spots are empty at any time. Peak use of parking space is often overestimated even when most users are automobile dependent. Surveys have shown that in most situations especially in suburban developments even at limited peak periods, parking use is at most sixty-five to eighty percent of capacity. This again emphasizes the idea that “free” and easy parking is a standard expectation of both employees and customers.⁶

Equity: The subsidized costs of parking are not realized by the general public while the costs of mass transit tends to be detailed to a greater extent. Those who use an automobile realize a great subsidy while those not using an automobile pay the costs without realizing the benefits.⁷

Experience: The United States has had little experience with elimination of minimum parking requirements. The alternative that has been offered and is actually in place in England is the idea of maximum parking allowances.⁸ Localities in the United States are experimenting with maximum parking allowances but generally the experience is with relaxation of minimum requirements. This relaxation has been in place in varying degrees through detailed zoning process or informally or formally through zoning appeal processes.⁹

Donald Shoup has been one of the leading proponents of reductions and alteration of our policy of minimum parking requirements. Reduction in these requirements has gained some popularity but runs into the reality of long-standing expectations about the nature and importance of the private automobile.

Affects of Reductions in Minimum Parking Requirements

Especially in urban settings where uses have been grandfathered without minimum parking requirements, parkers put pressure on the neighboring parking lots and on-street parking. Neighborhood residents often complain of loss of their own free street parking. Congestion also increases as motorists spend more time looking for parking and parking illegally or in inappropriate locations. These concerns have been met with changes in parking policies for neighborhoods.¹⁰

What has been done to implement this new policy?

Demonstrable Need: In this process a developer has the opportunity to show that the use of the property will not require as much parking. One way to do that is to show that the standard requirements do not reflect the realities in this particular situation. In an office situation the developer may show that car usage will be lower because of different factors:

1. Many of the employees use public or other non-private automobile transport either by choice or because the tenant charges for use of parking.
2. There are fewer employees that use the parking on a regular basis because they work outside the office most days.
3. Office space per employee is much higher than standards in parking regulations.
4. Parking space per square foot of retail space does not reflect actual usage. There is no demonstrable relationship between square footage of retail space and the need for parking. Parking requirements seem to be based on general surveys of parking needs averaged out. A particular retail building

of 100,000 square feet may use 50 parking spots while another of 50,000 may use 20 parking spots and a 10,000 square foot retail store may also use 20 parking spots. If these are averaged out based on square footage the 10,000 square foot store would be required to have only six spots, and the other two larger stores would be required to have 28 and 56 respectively.

5. Parking space can be shared with an adjoining property such as a church or other property that does not use their parking at the same time as this building.
6. New use will reduce parking pressure at an already non-conforming property. The example of such a situation is when an existing business such as a restaurant is converted to use as an office building. Under most building regulations a restaurant requires more parking than an office building. Since the new use will supposedly reduce parking pressure it will be allowed even though it will not be in compliance with normal parking requirements.

Two examples in the Twin Cities show the change in flexibility of these standards. The city of Savage¹¹ has developed a specific process for requesting variance from the minimum requirements while the city of Roseville¹² is less flexible and less specific on the ability to gain a variance.

Tightly developed urban areas have a flexibility built into their parking requirements. One of the common ones is the ability to develop a property so that the required parking spots are not reduced from existing usage. If a restaurant with higher parking requirements is turned into an office building, the parking requirements would not be enforced. For example, if the restaurant required 40 spaces but only had 15 and as a newly remodeled office building normally requiring twenty spaces it would conform to parking regulations because the new use reduces the need for parking spaces from the previous use as a restaurant. On the other hand it could not be redeveloped as a bar with dancing because that use might require 60 spaces.¹³

The 2001 National Household Travel Survey provides information on the use and availability of “free” parking and highlights the continued existence of “free” parking for most of the population.¹⁴ Exceptions exist only in the most urban areas served by mass transit, New York, San Francisco, and Boston are cities where the availability of free parking is limited or non-existent. Here there is still pressure to provide more parking but physically concentrated central cores do not have the ability to handle more traffic especially if parking, free or not, becomes more available.¹⁵

The attachment planners have with generalized minimum parking requirements is still reflected in planning and zoning requirements. The greatest change might be one that realizes the uniqueness of situations and places less emphasis on averaging parking requirements.¹⁶ Surveys that show average parking requirements may be technically correct but do not answer the more important question of how many parking spots are actually needed for a specific location.¹⁷ Increasingly development will take into account overall needs with parking simply as one factor in the whole development scheme.¹⁸

Another important issue that must be addressed is how much parking requirements increase with the increase in parking. It is becoming more accepted that increase in road capacity doesn't reduce congestion. The same analysis needs more emphasis in the question of parking needs.

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