

# Parking Reform Will Save the City

**Cities that require builders to provide off-street parking trigger more traffic, sprawl, and housing unaffordability. But we can break the vicious cycle.**

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At the dawn of the automobile age, suppose Henry Ford and John D. Rockefeller had asked how city planners could increase the demand for cars and gasoline. Consider three options. First, divide the city into separate zones (housing here, jobs there, shopping somewhere else) to create travel between the zones. Second, limit density to spread everything apart and further increase travel. Third, require ample off-street parking everywhere so cars will be the easiest and cheapest way to travel.

American cities have unwisely adopted these three car-friendly policies. Separated land uses, low density, and ample free parking create drivable cities and prevent walkable neighborhoods. Although city planners did not intend to enrich the automobile and oil industries, their plans have shaped our cities to suit our cars. As John Keats wrote in *The Insolent Chariots*, “The automobile changed our dress, manners, social customs, vacation habits, the shape of our cities, consumer purchasing patterns, and positions in intercourse.” Some of us were even conceived in a parked car.

Parking requirements are particularly ill-advised because they directly subsidize cars. We drive to one place to do one thing and then to another place to do another thing and then drive a long way back home, parking free everywhere. A flood of recent research has shown that parking requirements poison our cities, increasing traffic congestion, polluting the air, encouraging sprawl, raising housing costs, degrading urban design, preventing walkability, damaging the economy, and penalizing everyone who cannot afford a car.

Despite all the harm off-street parking requirements cause, they are almost an established religion in city planning. Without a theory or data to support them, planners set parking requirements for hundreds of land uses in hundreds of cities—the ten thousand commandments of planning for parking. Planners have adopted a veneer of professional language to justify the practice, but planning for parking is learned only on the job and it is more a political activity than a professional skill.

One should not criticize anyone else’s religion, but I’m a protestant when it comes to parking requirements—and I believe city planning needs a reformation.

## **The price we really pay to park for nothing**

America is a free country, and many people seem to think that means parking should be free. Parking requirements enable everyone to park free at everyone else’s expense and no one knows that anyone is paying anything. Parking is free, however, only because everything else is more expensive.

A recent study found that the parking spaces required for shopping centers in Los Angeles increase the cost of building a shopping center by 67 percent if the parking is in an aboveground structure and by 93 percent if the parking is underground. Retailers pass this high

cost on to all shoppers, regardless of how they travel. People who cannot afford a car pay more for their groceries so richer people can park free when they drive to the store.

That's true for housing, too. Small, spartan apartments cost less to build than large, luxury apartments, but their parking spaces cost the same. Because many cities require the same number of spaces for every apartment regardless of its size or quality, the required parking disproportionately increases the cost of low-income housing. One study found that minimum parking requirements raise housing costs by 13 percent for families without cars.

A city where everyone happily pays for everyone else's free parking is a fool's paradise.

Indeed, a single parking space can cost more than the net worth of many U.S. households. One study found that in 2015 the average construction cost (excluding land cost) for parking structures was about \$24,000 per space for aboveground parking and \$34,000 per space for underground parking. By comparison, the U.S. Census of Wealth and Asset Ownership in 2015 found that the median net worth (the value of assets minus debts) was \$110,500 for white households, \$19,990 for Hispanic households and \$12,780 for African American households. One space in a parking structure, therefore, costs more than the entire net worth of more than half of all Hispanic and black households in the country.

This mandate to provide homes for automobiles has devoured vast amounts of land. Parking lots typically have about 330 square feet per space. Because there are at least three off-street parking spaces per car in the United States, there are at least 990 square feet of off-street parking space per car. In comparison, there are about 800 square feet of housing space per person in the United States. The area of off-street parking per car is thus larger than the area of housing per human.

In astronomy, dark energy is a force that permeates space and causes the universe to expand. Similarly, in urban planning, parking requirements are a force that causes cities to expand. The higher the parking requirements, the stronger the dark energy that spreads cities out and rips them apart.

## **The most emotional topic in transportation**

Few people are interested in parking itself, but parking strongly affects issues people do care strongly about, such as affordable housing, climate change, economic development, public transportation, traffic congestion, and urban design. Parking requirements reduce the supply and increase the price of housing. Parking subsidies lure people into cars from public transportation, bicycles, or their own two feet. Cruising for curb parking congests roads, pollutes the air, and adds greenhouse gases. Do people really want a drive-in dystopia more than they want affordable housing, clean air, walkable neighborhoods, good urban design, and a sustainable planet?

But most people consider parking a personal issue, not a policy problem. They follow the axiomatic observation of George Costanza in *Seinfeld*, who famously said that paying for parking was like going to a prostitute: "Why should I pay when, if I apply myself, maybe I can get it for free."

Parking clouds people's minds, shifting analytic faculties to a low level. Rational people quickly become emotional; staunch conservatives turn into ardent communists. Thinking about parking seems to take place in the reptilian cortex, the primitive part of the brain said to govern behavior like aggression, territoriality, and ritual display—all factors in parking.

Some strongly support market prices—except for parking. Some strongly oppose subsidies—except for parking. Some abhor planning regulations—except for parking. Some insist on rigorous data collection and statistical tests—except for parking. This exceptionalism

has impoverished thinking about parking policies. If drivers paid the full cost of their parking, it would seem too expensive, so we expect someone else to pay for it. But a city where everyone happily pays for everyone else's free parking is a fool's paradise.

Off-street parking requirements are what engineers call a "kludge"—an awkward but temporarily effective solution to a problem. In this case, the problem they address is a shortage of free on-street parking. But severing the link between the cost of providing parking and the price that drivers pay for it increases the demand for cars, and when citizens object to the resulting traffic congestion, cities respond by restricting development to reduce traffic. In other words: Cities are limiting the density of people to limit the density of cars. Free parking has become the arbiter of urban form, and cars have replaced humans as zoning's real density concern.

Planners typically assume that every new resident will come with a car, so they require developers to provide enough off-street parking to house all the cars. Ample free parking then ensures that most residents do want a car. Parking requirements thus result from a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Improving parking policies could be the cheapest, quickest, and most politically feasible way to achieve many social, economic, and environmental goals.

Planners often use "motivated reasoning" to justify the parking requirements required by elected officials who want enough parking to ensure that citizens won't yell about a shortage of free parking. Then they must fashion arguments for conclusions already reached. Assumptions are the starting point of most parking requirements, and the person who makes the assumptions determines the outcome. Instead of reasoning about parking requirements, planners must rationalize them, and feign expertise they do not have. I have never met a city planner who could explain why any parking requirement should not be higher or lower. To set them, planners usually take instructions from elected officials, copy other cities' parking requirements, or rely on unreliable surveys. Parking requirements are closer to sorcery than to science.

### **The three essential parking reforms**

The upside of parking requirements is that removing them can trigger a cascade of benefits: shorter commutes, less traffic, a healthier economy, a cleaner environment, and more affordable housing. Vast parking lots can evolve into real communities. There's an accidental land reserve available for job-adjacent housing. If cities remove their parking requirements, we can reclaim land on a scale that will rival the Netherlands. Economic objectives often conflict with environmental objectives, but parking reforms can serve both.

To distill the 800 pages of my 2005 book *The High Cost of Free Parking* into three bullet points, I recommended three parking reforms that can improve cities, the economy, and the environment:

1. Remove off-street parking requirements. Developers and businesses can then decide how many parking spaces to provide for their customers.
2. Charge the right prices for on-street parking. The right prices are the lowest prices that will leave one or two open spaces on each block, so there will be no parking shortages. Prices will balance the demand and supply for on-street spaces.
3. Spend the parking revenue to improve public services on the metered streets. If everybody sees their meter money at work, the new public services can make demand-based prices for on-street parking politically popular.

Each of these three policies supports the other two. Spending the meter revenue to improve neighborhood public services can create the necessary political support to charge the right prices for curbside parking. If cities charge the right prices for curbside parking to produce one or two open spaces on every block, no one can say there is a shortage of on-street parking. If there is no shortage of on-street parking, cities can then remove their off-street parking requirements. Finally, removing off-street parking requirements will increase the demand for on-street parking, increasing the revenue to pay for public services.

Assembling support for parking reform is like opening a combination lock: Each small turn of the dial seems to achieve nothing, but when everything is in place the lock opens. These three reforms can open the parking combination lock.

Some critics argue that removing an off-street parking requirement amounts to “social engineering” and a “war on cars.” Instead, off-street parking requirements are a socially engineered war *for* cars. Removing a requirement that restaurants provide 10 parking spaces per 1,000 square feet of floor area is no more a war on cars than removing a requirement that everyone must eat in restaurants 10 times a month would be a war on restaurants.

### **The parking revolution has already started**

When *The High Cost of Free Parking* was published in 2005, half the city planning profession thought I was crazy and the other half thought I was daydreaming. Since then, several cities—including Buffalo, Hartford, Minneapolis, and San Francisco—have removed all their parking requirements, and many others have removed requirements in their downtowns. Mexico City has converted its minimum parking requirements into maximum parking limits while leaving the numbers almost unchanged. What once seemed politically impossible may slowly become the new normal.

Repealing off-street parking requirements and replacing them with market prices for on-street parking may at first glance seem like Prohibition, or the Reformation—too big an upheaval for society to accept. But it can attract voters across a wide political spectrum. Conservatives will see that it reduces government regulations. Liberals will see that it increases public spending. Environmentalists will see that it reduces energy consumption, air pollution, and carbon emissions. Urban designers will see that it enables people to live at higher density without being overrun by cars. Developers will see that it reduces building costs. Residents will see that it improves their neighborhood public services. Drivers of all political stripes will see that it guarantees convenient curbside parking. Elected officials will see that it depoliticizes parking, reduces traffic congestion, allows infill development, and provides public services without raising taxes. Finally, planners can devote less time to parking and more time to improving cities.

Recognizing that our parking policies block progress toward many critical goals may help spark this planning reformation; simply improving parking policies could be the cheapest, quickest, and most politically feasible way to achieve many social, economic, and environmental goals. Cities will look and work much better when prices—not planners and politicians—govern decisions about the number of parking spaces. Like the automobile itself, parking is a good servant but a bad master.

*This piece is adapted from Parking and the City (Routledge 2018).*

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