

A Strategic Guide to Implementing Parking Reform



Reducing costly parking mandates can be a challenging task for planners and decision-makers.

Too often, the easiest thing to do is to continue the pattern of the past: require new development to provide lots of parking, avoiding potential complaints from people accustomed to abundant, “free” (subsidized) parking.

This hides the large costs of parking, but makes it harder to walk and easier to drive, artificially driving up the demand for parking and the costs of housing, doing business, and getting around.

How to break the cycle? Here are some recommendations on how cities might go about reforming the costly, counter-productive market distortion of mandated car parking.

Understanding the Fears

The average person worried about parking reform usually recalls a time about when they failed to find free, available parking exactly where and when they wanted it. That experience leads to a belief: mandating more parking will make travel easier and more pleasant, at no cost to themselves.

Embedded in this story are important assumptions. First, the assumption is parking is a public good, where the government can and should help people store their vehicle wherever they go at little or no cost. Second, someone else will pay for the costs of providing parking (people often ascribe this to a “developer” who makes large profits). Third, walking a short distance from parking to a destination is a problem.

This narrative isn’t easy to break down. The rest of this piece suggests some ways around it.

1. Provide Data – and Images

Cities generally try to meet parking demand. Here’s the good news: when communities take the time to collect data, they nearly always find there is sufficient *supply* of car parking within a block or two of each location, it just needs to be better *managed* through signage, time limits, or pricing. (Parking surveys can be a small effort of just a few hours; larger efforts are better, or you can hire a professional).

Walking, on-the-ground studies of parking supply and use is one of the best ways to get over the anecdotal



Just some of the land in downtown Klamath Falls devoted to parking

stories in people’s minds. Involving the skeptics in such a survey is very useful, so they can see for themselves how many parking spaces exist, and how often they are full. This sort of study is explained in TGM’s “Parking Made Easy” Manual, available free for download:

www.oregon.gov/lcd/Publications/ParkingMadeEasy_2013.pdf

These data are best used by presenting them with photos and images. The photos should be of key areas of perceived parking shortage, along with aerial images of the total land space devoted to parking. Keep it simple.



An example of plentiful parking in Ontario, OR

2. Approach Reform Incrementally

People’s fear of a parking shortage comes from an inability to know what the future holds. One way to get over the fear is to tackle parking reform incrementally. Implementing small reforms can allow people to see the impacts of moving away from the outdated parking mandate model, and make it easier to take on more comprehensive reform. Incremental reforms are outlined in a companion publication, “8 Quick Ways Cities Can Improve Parking Codes” here:

www.oregon.gov/lcd/TGM/Pages/Parking.aspx

3. Focus on What People Care About

There is a curious thing in parking codes across Oregon: in city after city, relatively high parking mandates are combined with a hodge-podge of exceptions. The results is a complex nest of government mandates and loopholes, when a simpler approach of lower mandates would be easier for builders to understand and for cities to implement.

Those exceptions most likely came out either of copying codes from other cities, or average residents asking for a change. Downtown businesses, for example, often have reduced levels of mandated parking, or ways to get around the requirements. The same is true with affordable housing providers and small businesses.

While comprehensive reform is hard, it is relatively easy for a city council to focus on a specific area people care about – downtown, small business, affordable housing – and provide an exception to the rule for those people. The high cost of subsidized parking overall needn’t be addressed head-on. Rather, each specific type of housing or business can be addressed singularly, allowing cities to frame reducing parking mandates to be in service of what it is: encouraging the types of development community members want.

For instance, small business is typically valued by community leaders. Consider eliminating parking mandates for small businesses that move into an existing building downtown.

4. Combine It with Other Reforms

Another way cities can reduce costly parking mandates is to do it while reforming another policy. For example, the Salem Multifamily Housing Design Code update focused on making it easier to build multifamily housing. As a small part of that effort, staff proposed reducing parking mandates. The community conversation mainly focused on open space, balconies, and privacy, while the parking improvements came along for the ride.

5. Consider What Your Language Says

Some of the challenge of parking reform comes from how we talk about it.

Don't Say	Instead Use
<p>Parking requirements <i>The word “requirements” indicates something is required, implicitly that it is needed. It is also value-neutral.</i></p>	<p>Costly parking mandates <i>Remind people parking costs money and land to provide. And use the term “mandates” which implies a heavier hand.</i></p>
<p>Parking needs <i>This implies a static, clear human need. Parking responds to market signals.</i></p>	<p>Parking demand <i>This reflects a more dynamic, market-based approach to parking; one that can be responded to by pricing.</i></p>
<p>Free parking <i>Building and maintaining parking is costly. Sometimes it is unpriced, hiding that cost. People like free things.</i></p>	<p>Subsidized parking <i>This highlights the costs of parking are borne by someone. Sometimes it is renters, or business owners, or local builders and contractors – but the subsidy is coming from somewhere. Subsidy raises important questions of fairness.</i></p>
<p>Developer <i>Most people have a negative connotation with the work “developer” and believe they are making excess profit, and can absorb any cost.¹</i></p>	<p>Local builders and contractors <i>People like local businesses.</i></p>
<p>Parking <i>People use the term parking so often they often fail to think about what it is, or what it means. Reform is harder when people have coherent stories making them think the world has to work a certain way.</i></p>	<p>Car storage <i>Occasionally when talking about parking throw in the term “car storage.” This allows people to start thinking about what parking is, and how space-intensive it can be. But because it is awkward to have a smooth conversation with such a mind-changing frame, only replace it occasionally.</i></p>

Again and again, as communities discuss parking mandates, something happens to the conversation. Specifically, “reducing required parking” suddenly becomes “eliminating provided parking.” **Emphasize there are no data showing that to be the case.** Lenders and builders make the business decision to meet the desire for parking. In Portland, builders report still building about 0.7 spaces per new inner-city unit served by transit; Seattle data are about the same. In downtown Los Angeles, builders provide an average of 1.2 spaces per unit. While there are some

Not Requiring Parking does not mean Requiring No Parking

To put it more clearly:

No Mandated Parking ≠ No Provided Parking

Evidence Shows Builders Tend to Provide Parking Demanded by Tenants

¹ Monkkonen and Manville, “Opposition to Development or Opposition to Developers? Survey Evidence from Los Angeles County on Attitudes towards New Housing,” February 22, 2018

developments without on-site parking, those developments are not the norm. The housing market will provide parking demanded by potential tenants.

Parking consultant Richard Willson finds certain themes can work at city councils. Suggestions include: “It’s a win-win.” “We’ve changed.” (Maybe parking requirements had their place, but they’re outdated.) “It’s in the comprehensive plan.” (Parking reform is just implementing a previous decision). “City X did it.” “We could lose funding opportunities.” And “The risks are less than you think.”

6. Tell Stories from Other Communities and Favorite Places

Community leaders are risk-adverse about the unknown. It’s entirely human. To help your community along, learn the stories from other communities that have implemented reform (find some in Donald Shoup’s [The High Cost of Free Parking](#) or [Parking and the City](#) books, or at TGM’s parking web page: www.oregon.gov/lcd/TGM/Pages/Parking.aspx).

Give examples from other city codes, or tell people about a vibrant area of a city they like without much mandated parking. Or ask people to name a favorite part of their city (often an older area), and ask whether it could be replicated under current parking mandates.

7. Find Community Voices to Provide Perspective

The best way for communities interested in cutting expensive parking mandates to do so is to find community members who can tell the story of what it would mean for them. Local builders, housing advocates, climate activists, and businesses can all be asked to tell stories. Remember: parking meters were invented by Oklahoma City merchants in the 1930s to help local business.

Sometimes it’s also helpful for local builders and bankers to remind governments they’ll still build parking, even if it isn’t mandated. The fear of change can be reduced when people realize removing mandates still allows developers to provide parking tenants demand.

The messenger is, in many ways, the message. People can tell a cohesive story about reality if the messenger themselves reflect the underlying message, rather than simply being a city staffer. For example: “This builder knows what she’s talking about, and so reform will result in more housing that people can afford.”

8. Engage in a Community Conversation and Workshops

More comprehensive parking reforms (such as downtown time limits or pricing) can come about by engaging key voices in a multi-meeting community conversation. Getting people to think through their priorities, options for how to balance those, and agree on solutions can be a way to get to yes. TGM may be able to help fund these efforts; we also explain how you can run this process in our “Parking Made Easy” publication on our web site.

More Resources

The Transportation and Growth Management program is eager to help cities reduce their parking mandates. We can provide speakers, have collected numerous resources on-line, and may be able to provide consultants. For assistance, call Evan Manvel at (503) 934-0059 or e-mail him at evan.manvel@state.or.us.

Visit us at www.oregon.gov/lcd/tgm

The TGM web page on parking, including handouts, do-it-yourself manuals and links to parking resources: www.oregon.gov/lcd/TGM/Pages/Parking.aspx