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Planners and Parking Requirements

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I have spent the last 35 years working ineffectively to reform American parking policies, especially minimum parking requirements in zoning ordinances. This year I thought my time had come when [Assembly Bill 904](http://shoup.bol.ucla.edu/AssemblyBill904.pdf) (The Sustainable Minimum Parking Requirements Act of 2012) was introduced in the California Legislature. AB 904 would cap minimum parking requirements at 1 space per dwelling unit or 2 spaces per 1,000 square feet of commercial space in transit-intensive districts, which the bill defined as areas within a quarter-mile of transit lines that run every 15 minutes or better. Although AB 904 would limit how much off-street parking cities could require, it would not “restrain” off-street parking; if the market demands more parking, developers could always provide it.

In *The High Cost of Free Parking*, I argued that minimum parking requirements subsidize cars, increase vehicle travel, encourage sprawl, worsen air pollution, raise housing costs, degrade urban design, preclude walkability, and exclude poor people. To my knowledge, no city planner has argued that minimum parking requirements do *not* have these harmful effects. AB 904’s cap on minimum parking requirements in transit-intensive districts could thus provide great benefits for cities, the economy, and the environment.

*Minimum parking requirements in transit-intensive areas*

Most cities require lots of parking even where there is ample public transit. The federal and state governments give cities billions of dollars every year to build and operate mass transit, yet most cities require parking based on the assumption that everyone will drive everywhere. Los Angeles, for example, is building its “subway to the sea” under Wilshire Boulevard, which already has the city’s most frequent bus service. Nevertheless, along parts of Wilshire the city requires at least 2.5 parking spaces for each dwelling unit, regardless of the number of habitable rooms. If every one-bedroom apartment has 2.5 parking spaces, how many residents will ride public transit?

Los Angeles also requires *free* off-street parking along parts of Wilshire Boulevard: “For office and other commercial uses there shall be at least three parking spaces provided for each 1,000 square feet of gross floor area available at no charge to all patrons and employees of those uses.” If all commuters and shoppers can park free, few will leave their cars at home and ride the bus or subway to work or shop on Wilshire.

Twenty public transit lines serve the UCLA campus, adjacent to Wilshire Boulevard, with 119 buses per hour arriving on campus during the morning peak (7 to 9 am). Nevertheless, directly across the street from campus, Los Angeles requires 3.5 parking spaces per unit for apartments that contain more than four habitable rooms—and even a kitchen counts as a habitable room. On another transit-rich stretch of Wilshire Boulevard, Beverly Hills requires 22 parking spaces per 1,000 square feet for restaurants, which means the parking lot is seven times larger than the restaurant it serves. Public transit in this parking environment is as superfluous as a Gideon Bible at the Ritz.

*The rationale for a statewide limit on minimum parking requirements*

The rationale for a statewide cap on parking requirements in transit-intensive districts is the same as the rationale for most city planning: the uncoordinated actions of many individuals can add up to a collective result that most people do not like. In this case, the uncoordinated parking requirements of many cities can add up to an asphalt wasteland that blights the environment and decants transit riders into cars.

The United Kingdom’s guidance on parking policy provides a precedent for national action to manage local parking requirements. In 2001 the UK’s Department for Communities and Local Government published a [guidance document](http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=4&cad=rja&ved=0CDAQFjAD&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.communities.gov.uk%2Fdocuments%2Fplanningandbuilding%2Fpdf%2F155634.pdf&ei=Nvo7UJ3dEuS9igKQvIHADg&usg=AFQjCNEG6qZ7g8EpfLTpoI8k-9k7WiesRQ) stating that cities should “not require developers to provide more spaces than they themselves wish. . .There should be no minimum [parking] standards for development, other than parking for disabled people.” Following this guidance, in 2004 the [Greater London Authority](http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=%22london%20plan%20february%202004&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCAQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fstatic.london.gov.uk%2Fmayor%2Fstrategies%2Fsds%2Flondon_plan%2Flon_plan_all.pdf&ei=3v07UIaXIebmiwKkrYHgCg&usg=AFQjCNGkI8jkzWrlesrBbyXSGJhEXRYUsg&cad=rja) required its 33 boroughs to set a maximum number of parking spaces allowed for all developments, with no minimum number of parking spaces required. For apartment buildings that have good public transit access or are within a 10 minute walk of a town center, for example, the maximum number of parking spaces allowed is 1 space per dwelling unit. That is, London’s parking maximum of 1 space per unit (with no minimum) is the same as California’s proposed minimum (with no maximum).

In the United States, planning for parking is solely a municipal responsibility. As a result, parking policy is parochial. For example, because sales taxes are an important source of local public revenue in California, cities are under terrific pressure to attract retail sales. Fierce competition for sales tax revenue puts cities in a race to offer ample free parking for all potential customers. This battle is an expensive zero-sum game within a region because more parking everywhere cannot increase the total regional sales volume.

Beyond competing for sales tax revenue, cities have other parochial incentives to set high minimum parking requirements. Everyone wants to park free, and minimum parking requirements allow elected officials to subsidize parking at someone else’s expense. The required parking spaces cost a lot, but the cost is hidden in higher prices for everything else.

*Opposition from the California Chapter of the American Planning Association*

I was disappointed when the California Chapter of the American Planning Association opposed AB 904 and lobbied against it in the Legislature. Cal APA argued that AB 904 “would restrict local agencies’ ability to require parking in excess of statewide ratios for transit intensive areas unless the local agency makes certain findings and adopts an ordinance to opt out of the requirement.”

The APA insists that cities have the right to require too much parking in transit-intensive districts if they want, but its objections to AB 904 resemble objections to urban planning itself. Planners require a specific number of parking spaces for every building in the city, but they oppose any limits on how much parking they can require.

City planners must, of course, take direction from elected officials, but the American Planning Association does not. AB 904 gave planners an opportunity to lead, but instead the APA insisted on local control over parking requirements regardless of any larger consequences.

Off-street parking requirements result from complicated political and economic forces. Nevertheless, the planning profession provides a veneer of professional language that serves to justify parking requirements. Planners receive no professional training about parking requirements and most planning textbooks do not even mention the topic. Planning for parking is a skill learned only on the job, and it is more a political than a professional activity. Despite their lack of professional training, however, practicing planners in every city must set parking requirements for every land use. Urban planners do not have the time or talent to estimate the demand for parking at each restaurant, apartment house, church, and nail salon everywhere. Simply put, planners are winging it when it comes to parking requirements, and, at best, the requirements are the outcome of simple tinkering. We should not attribute to planners an omniscience they do not possess.

*A debate on minimum parking requirements*

Every developer knows that minimum parking requirements are often the real limit to urban density. Minimum parking requirements force developers to provide more parking than they want, or to construct smaller buildings than the zoning allows. Off-street parking requirements do not promote a walkable and sustainable city, but instead create a drivable and unsustainable city. If cities require ample off-street parking everywhere, most people will continue to drive everywhere even if Santa Claus miraculously presented them with a great transit system.

The California Legislature has delayed until next year action on the bill to reduce parking requirements in transit-intensive areas. Nevertheless, the proposal has already fomented [debate](http://shoup.bol.ucla.edu/LettersAboutAssemblyBill904.pdf) within the planning profession. I hope transportation planners throughout the world will join in discussing how minimum parking requirements affect cities, the economy, and the environment. Should cities have parking maximums with no minimums, like London? Or parking minimums with no maximums, like Los Angeles? And should state or national governments limit how much parking cities can require? Perhaps the easiest and most productive first step is to reduce minimum parking requirements in transit-intensive districts and study the results.