

Why More and More Cities Aren't Prioritizing Your Parking Troubles

Cities are eliminating requirements for new buildings to have parking.

by [Alan Greenblatt](#) | December 2018



The Over-the-Rhine neighborhood in Cincinnati (*Flickr/Travis Estell*)

Over-the-Rhine has been one of the biggest urban success stories of recent years. The neighborhood, which is just north of downtown Cincinnati, was in deep disrepair two decades ago, with thousands of residential units sitting vacant, turning into what amounted to an open-air drug market. Since then, however, city officials, corporations and developers have all taken an interest, sprucing up a historic district slightly larger than the French Quarter in New Orleans and filling it with condos, offices and restaurants.

One of the side effects has been parking trouble. The city has responded in an unexpected way, eliminating the requirement that developers provide a minimum number of parking spots for each office or apartment.

For years, urbanists have argued that parking minimums create more problems than they solve. The promotion of parking, they argue, encourages unnecessary vehicle ownership and makes infill development more expensive and sometimes impractical. Land that could be put to productive use often sits idle as parking lots, with many of the spaces empty except for a few seasonal periods of peak use, such as the Christmas shopping season. These parking requirements raise costs for developers, who pass them on to occupants. One University of California, Los Angeles study found that, around the country, 700,000 renters who don't have cars are nevertheless paying for parking to the tune of \$440 million a year.

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In response, numerous cities have abolished parking minimums, whether citywide, along transit lines or, as in Cincinnati, in the urban core. Buffalo, N.Y., Indianapolis, Kansas City, Mo., and Seattle have all relaxed what were once strict parking requirements. "It's a regulatory demand, not a market demand," says C.J. Gabbe, a planning professor at Santa Clara University. "Given the opportunity, developers tend to build less parking."

In Over-the-Rhine, parking mandates had caused perverse development decisions, with usable buildings sitting vacant because of the cost of adding parking -- or being torn down for lots to satisfy parking requirements for projects located blocks away. Developers of dozens of projects had requested waivers, suggesting the system wasn't working. "[The new rules] make development, especially small business development, a little bit easier," says Philip Denning, a Cincinnati development official. "There's one less box you have to check."

The changes were approved by the city council only in September, but already neighborhood associations in other parts of Cincinnati are asking whether parking minimums can be abolished or reduced in their sections of town. Knowing that commercial developments would benefit the most -- and that residents would be mad if they were forever having to circle around to find a space -- the city implemented a residential permit parking system for Over-the-Rhine. "I always encourage cities to think about both the off-street and on-street parking requirements," Gabbe says. "If you're reducing the off-street parking requirements, you have to actively manage street parking."



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