

Plan On It

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Rethinking Parking Requirements: Does Your Community Really Have a Parking Problem?

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Parking is a fascinating, sometimes emotional topic that can ignite passionate reactions from members of the public, businesses, developers and even government officials. It's so provocative that public meetings can easily get drawn into the gravitational pull of the issue, regardless of the original topic. And just as the topic of parking can shape nearly any conversation on local issues, parking also shapes our communities. Whether the location is a tiny hamlet, a suburban strip mall or an older urban center, parking dominates our daily lives. But there has been a noticeable shift in parking policy in recent years.

Many zoning codes that are currently shaping our built environment were drafted during the ascendancy of the automobile. After WWII, development in the industrial Northeast and Upper Midwest began to move away from cities. Housing and transportation policies encouraged more single-family suburban-style development, and while many people who had the means left cities, cities remained employment centers, drawing commuters back to the urban core, usually via automobile. Thus, communities established policies, often through zoning, to accommodate the car. Highways were built right through neighborhoods and downtowns for the sake of traffic expediency, and, germane to the subject of parking, cities developed off-street parking standards in the name of relieving traffic congestion and parking on neighborhood streets.¹



Parking shapes our communities. This famous photo of downtown Houston (c. 1978) is an extreme example of a community shaped by auto-dependence. Some estimates claim there were 30 parking spaces for every person in Houston. [Photo credit: Alex MacLean]

At the same time that cities began to require large amounts of off-street parking, disinvestment and flight from the urban core continued, leading to a new issue: vacant buildings and increasingly vacant parking lots. Despite this increasing vacancy, excessive off-street parking requirements continued as the norm. Today, many cities are looking for ways to attract residents and businesses, particularly as interest in urban living from both the Millennial generation and retiring Baby Boomers grows, and they are finding stringent parking requirements to be a major barrier to development. So what can be done to modernize your community's parking policy?

Learning from the City of Poughkeepsie's recent downtown parking study, your community can take steps toward understanding and improving the parking user experience while at the same time ensuring parking adds to, rather than detracts from, a community's vitality and quality of life.

Understand Your Existing Conditions

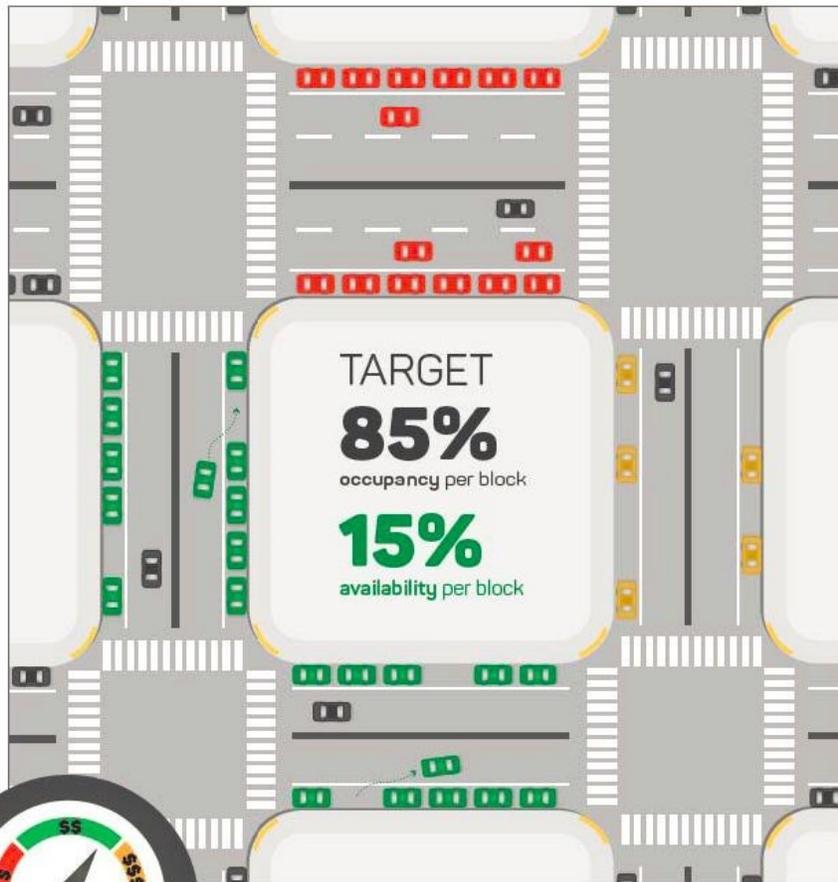
Every community has characteristics that make a place unique and special, but there are also common elements that every community must manage, and parking is no exception. Towns, villages and hamlets, like larger cities, have commercial areas with a variety of businesses that draw customers at different times of day, and many of these customers are likely to utilize parking. Understanding the existing parking conditions and needs in your community is an important first step toward making informed and meaningful changes to parking policy.

In the summer of 2017, the Dutchess County Transportation Council and the City of Poughkeepsie embarked on a detailed examination of parking conditions and management in the city's downtown, including an inventory of both on-street and off-street spaces, utilization, a current and future demand analysis, and a review of parking policy within the zoning code. The consultant team made some key observations regarding inventory and utilization during the existing conditions survey, including:

- There are more than 7,100 parking spaces within the City of Poughkeepsie's downtown;
- 82% of all spaces are off-street spaces;
- Nearly a quarter of the land in the city's downtown is used for parking;
- At no time during the work week was parking utilized more than 51%, leaving over 3,400 parking spaces available even at peak occupancy; and
- Weekday evening and weekend parking utilization was below 30%.²

The broad conclusion from these observations is that downtown Poughkeepsie is oversupplied on parking. The old parking paradigm would say that abundant supply is always desirable, while the new paradigm says too much supply can be just as harmful as too little.³ Too much supply can make a neighborhood feel empty and abandoned, leading to concerns of safety and security. But what is the right amount of parking, and how does a community measure success in meeting parking needs?

The authors of the Poughkeepsie parking study recommend that the city adopt availability as the primary performance measure, with an industry standard target of 15% of on-street spaces available (about 1-2 per block face) and 5%-10% of spaces available in off-street parking facilities at any given moment. These standards allow for readily available spaces, guarding against a perceived lack of parking while ensuring that parking is not underutilized. For communities with paid parking, right-pricing parking spaces will help achieve these targets.



PROGRESSIVE PARKING

If block/lot is too full, **increase the price**

If block/lot is too empty, **lower the price**

If block/lot is just right, **keep the same price**

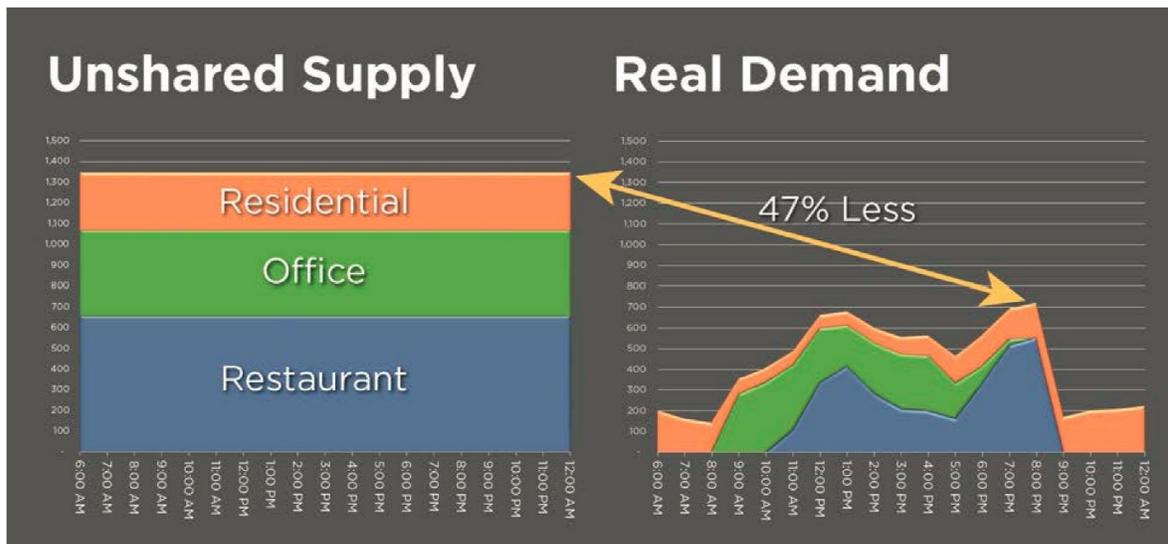
The industry standard is to have 15% of spaces available per block. If your community charges for parking, pricing can help achieve this availability target. [Graphic credit: Nelson/Nygaard]

In Poughkeepsie’s case, even with pricing that responds to demand-and-supply dynamics, the city’s downtown would still be oversupplied on parking. How did Poughkeepsie arrive at such an oversupply? This is explained, in part, by zoning. If your community feels empty and lacking in vigor, it may be time to look at your zoning code.

Look At Your Code

Minimum parking requirements are a common feature in many local zoning codes, and they often assume a single demand level throughout the course of a 24-hour period. In other words, codes do not adjust for differing demands depending on the user and time of day. For example, in a mixed-use building, there might be office space on the ground floor and residential space on the upper floors. Typically, users of the office space only need parking during the day while residential users only need parking during the evening and overnight hours. Yet minimum parking requirements in zoning codes mandate that parking for all users be available at all times of the day, resulting in an unnecessarily high

aggregate number of parking spaces being built. This forces the developer to provide off-street parking by acquiring additional land for surface or structured parking, increasing the cost of development and decreasing the density of active land uses, all of which makes it more difficult for communities to support vibrant downtowns. Even the Obama White House acknowledged the barrier that off-street parking requirements pose to development and how that negatively impacts a community's ability to efficiently use land and provide housing that is affordable.⁴



Zoning code regulations for mixed-use districts often require more parking spaces than are necessary, treating each land use individually and insisting spaces for each use be available at all times. [Graphic credit: Nelson/Nygaard]

Parking standards in zoning codes are often linked to the Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE) parking generation guide. Because ITE relies on the same demand level for the entire 24-hour period, rather than reflect the overlapping and shared nature of parking in village and city centers, municipalities should be careful in how they use ITE data to establish (minimum) parking standards. Relying solely on ITE numbers will likely overestimate parking demand in walkable, mixed-use environments.⁵ The consultant team that studied Poughkeepsie's downtown did a side-by-side comparison of the city's code versus ITE's parking requirements. In many cases, Poughkeepsie's requirements even exceed those of ITE for the most common land uses.⁶

Poughkeepsie's Innovative Approach

Informed by this analysis of Poughkeepsie's parking requirements and motivated by the complementary goals of achieving a high-quality pedestrian environment and encouraging the redevelopment of vacant property downtown, Poughkeepsie's proposed Innovation District (PID) zoning greatly reduces or in some cases even eliminates parking minimums. The PID was drafted in consultation with land use law and zoning experts, along with input from numerous stakeholders and the public, and it is currently under consideration before the Poughkeepsie Common Council.

The PID's policy framework acknowledges it is unrealistic to expect that any amount of transit access improvements or land use intensification will completely eliminate the need to provide parking; workers, visitors and residents will still need places to park.⁷ However, requiring large amounts of off-street parking imposes a blight on the urban landscape by introducing large amounts of land absent from any people or activity. As the authors of *Suburban Nation* bluntly state:

"[Excessive parking requirements] is probably the single greatest killer of urbanism in the United States today. It prevents the renovation of old buildings, since there is inadequate room on their sites for new parking; it encourages the construction of anti-pedestrian building types in which the building sits behind or hovers above a parking lot; it eliminates street life, since everyone parks immediately adjacent to their destination and has no reason to use the sidewalk; [and] finally, it results in a low density of development that can keep a downtown from achieving critical mass."⁸



Parking is a necessary part of any community, but too much parking can detract from a community's vitality. In the City of Poughkeepsie, the Crannell Lot, the largest surface parking lot by land area, is never more than 30% occupied. [Photo credit: Paul Hesse]

Importantly, the move to reduce parking minimums in the Innovation District was validated by the parking study. The study examined current parking demand while also modeling future demand under various growth scenarios. Under even the most accelerated growth scenario, which considered all pipeline development projects being completed, all vacant commercial and residential spaces being fully occupied, and some redevelopment of large surface parking lots (which would simultaneously add to demand and reduce the supply), downtown Poughkeepsie would still be able to meet its parking needs. Thus, the city is comfortable considering this progressive approach to parking minimums.

The proposed PID will reduce parking minimum requirements while at the same time capping off-street parking at 115% of the requirement. This way, land is not unnecessarily reserved for parking, which is not the highest and best use of land in mixed-use districts where space is at a premium. Too much surface and structured parking become missed opportunities for retail, restaurants and residential uses, which impacts potential tax revenue and draws away from neighborhood vitality.

The User Experience

It is not unusual for workers, residents or visitors in a given community to think there is a shortage of parking, especially in a downtown area. However, while there may seem to be acute parking shortages at certain times in certain locations, that is not the norm. Often, the real issue is with finding the parking spot that is closest to one's destination, not an actual lack of parking.

During the Poughkeepsie parking study, workers and visitors were surveyed with a number of questions, including "When choosing where to park in the downtown area, what are your most important considerations?" "Location/convenience to destination" was either the

number one choice or a close second among the various groups surveyed. Notably, a majority of survey respondents admitted that finding a space in downtown Poughkeepsie usually takes less than three minutes, and roughly 80% of respondents said that they are parking within one block or less from their destination. And yet, the perception that it can be hard to find parking in downtown Poughkeepsie endures.

Something about the psychology of parking changes when one is parking in an urban setting versus, say, a suburban strip mall. Consider having to park a block and a half away from a downtown restaurant. This is a similar distance to what one will potentially have to walk when parking at a mall. Yet in an urban setting like downtown Poughkeepsie, parking a block or two away, especially if the parking is not within sight of the destination, makes that space much less desirable. Let's examine the psychology that might be at play when we are willing to walk the equivalent of two blocks or more at a mall, but not downtown.

Improved Walkability Affects Parking

Perceived safety concerns may be partly to blame when someone considers where to park, as is the case with downtown Poughkeepsie. During the parking study, survey respondents were asked whether they've ever avoided certain parking places due to safety concerns, with 69% saying yes. Survey respondents' top two reasons for being unwilling to walk to and within downtown Poughkeepsie were "lack of other people walking" and "lack of lighting at night." Clearly, people need to feel safe when walking to and from a parking space. But as renowned urban planner and author Jeff Speck recently stated, "The fact is that you are safer in the most drug-infested, inner-city neighborhoods of any metropolitan area than you are in the leafy country-club suburbs if you [look at] crime [versus] death by automobile. The studies show this very clearly."⁹ In other words, you are more likely to be injured or killed in an automobile-related accident than you are in a random act of violence. Perception does not always match reality, but perception is still a powerful factor in a person's decision-making process for where to park and when to walk.

But there are other factors that people consider when deciding whether a walk is worth it. Speck outlines four tenets of walkability that must be met in order to have a high-quality pedestrian environment that encourages walking. According to Speck, a walkable environment should meet the following four needs:

1. Walking must be useful: most aspects of daily life are close at hand and well-organized;
2. Walking must be and feel safe (real and perceived): streets are designed to be safe and also feel safe to pedestrians;
3. Walking must be comfortable: urban streets as outdoor living rooms, places where people want to be; and,
4. Walking must be interesting: humans like to be entertained, sidewalks lined with unique buildings and friendly faces.¹⁰

If your community is not meeting these four tenets or otherwise does not feel safe, people may be more averse to walking any sort of distance to their destination. Zoning is partially responsible for places feeling un-walkable, in part by encouraging excessive surface parking that result in large zones of inactivity. As the parking survey demonstrated, people feel less comfortable walking in a place like Poughkeepsie when they don't see other people walking. Thus, increasing activity and adding more "eyes on the street" can help combat misperceptions.

Prioritizing People or Cars?

Parking is a fact of life. It shapes our communities and it shapes the way we interact with the built environment, either in a positive or negative way. Does your community aspire to be a vibrant and economically successful place? It may be time to look at your parking policy. It would be an overstatement to say that getting parking "right" in your community

will fix all problems, but parking does influence behavior and development patterns, and it can be beneficial to reexamine your policies to ensure that they are meeting the parking needs of your community without sacrificing the essential character that makes a place special and inviting.

So if it's been a while since you've looked at your parking requirements, start with the following:

1. Understand what the parking availability and demand is in your community;
2. Look at your parking requirements and decide whether people or parking is your community's highest priority; and,
3. Examine the quality of your community's pedestrian experience to ensure that walking is a viable, even enjoyable, part of the journey from the car to one's destination.

Then ask yourself whether you have a parking problem or whether you have a walkability problem. The most walkable cities in the U.S. often have paid parking and almost always require some amount of walking to get to one's destination. But users are more willing to overlook this because the walking environment feels safe, comfortable and interesting. A revamped parking policy could lead to more efficient use of parking facilities and could unlock development potential in your community.

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- 1 Elliot, Donald L. *A Better Way To Zone*. Island Press. Washington DC: 2008 (p 166).
 - 2 [Poughkeepsie Downtown Parking Improvement Plan: Assessment of Existing Conditions and Demand](http://cityofpoughkeepsie.com/wp-content/files/DPIP/ExistingConditionsReport_020118.pdf). cityofpoughkeepsie.com/wp-content/files/DPIP/ExistingConditionsReport_020118.pdf
 - 3 Littman, Todd. "[Parking Planning Paradigm Shift](http://planetizen.com/blogs/99462-parking-planning-paradigm-shift)." Planetizen. July 5, 2018. www.planetizen.com/blogs/99462-parking-planning-paradigm-shift
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 - 5 [Poughkeepsie Downtown Parking Improvement Plan: Strategic Plan for Parking Operations and Management](http://cityofpoughkeepsie.com/wp-content/files/DPIP/Revised_Draft_Poughkeepsie_Operations_Strategic_Plan_041618_sm.pdf). cityofpoughkeepsie.com/wp-content/files/DPIP/Revised_Draft_Poughkeepsie_Operations_Strategic_Plan_041618_sm.pdf
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 - 7 [Poughkeepsie Innovation District Policy Framework](http://cityofpoughkeepsie.com/wp-content/files/rezone/PIDPolicyFrameworkZoning21AUG2018.pdf). cityofpoughkeepsie.com/wp-content/files/rezone/PIDPolicyFrameworkZoning21AUG2018.pdf
 - 8 Duany, Andres, et al. *Suburban Nation*. North Point Press. New York: 2000. (p 163)
 - 9 Speck, Jeff. *Walkable City Rules*. [Webinar](http://www.citylab.com/webinars/2018/10/walkable-city-rules/). October 22, 2018. bit.ly/2EZHbLc
 - 10 Speck, Jeff. *Walkable City*. North Point Press. New York: 2012.

More Information

City of Poughkeepsie [Downtown Parking Improvement Plan project website](#)

[Donald Shoup](#) — Parking Guru and Professor

[Parking Is Sexy Now. Thank Donald Shoup](#) — article, CityLab

[The High Cost of Free Parking](#) — short documentary, Vox (~7min)

[Hey, Buddy, What Will You Pay for This Parking Spot?](#) — article, Planning (APA)

[Parking Planning Paradigm Shift](#) — blog post, Planetizen

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[Case Studies – Smart Parking](#), Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs

[Dutchess County Transportation Council](#)

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