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HOUSING MATTERS

Parking Mandates Drive up Housing Costs. Let's Learn from Others and Eliminate Them

With Little Basis in Fact, Requirements Can Hobble Housing Construction

BY SUSAN GITTELMAN
SPECIAL TO BANKER & TRADESMAN

It would be hard to imagine two U.S. housing markets more different than Buffalo and Seattle. Buffalo has the nation's oldest housing stock and affordability there is as much about income inequality as lack of supply. Meanwhile, Seattle's population has grown by more than 20 percent since 2010 and even a homebuilding surge hasn't been enough to keep up with the growth.

One thing these two disparate markets have in common is the benefits that have flowed from decisions to eliminate or significantly reduce parking mandates: local rules that ban new homes and businesses unless they come with a pre-determined number of off-street parking spaces.

In 2012, Seattle reduced or eliminated parking mandates in urban centers near busy transit stations. Five years later, Buffalo eliminated parking mandates citywide.

Both cities saw increased housing development in the wake of the changes. In Seattle, nearly 10 percent of the city's housing stock was built in the five years following enactment of the reform.

But the real headline is that 59 percent of the new homes built in Seattle and 68 percent in Buffalo would have been illegal under the prior codes.

Big Impact on Monthly Rents

One parking space can add more than $200 to monthly rent. Bring down the cost of production and more dollars go to housing and fewer to parking.

"In most places where new homes are being built, it's important to prioritize space for people over cars," said Jennifer Raitt, executive director of the Northern Middlesex Council of Governments. "We need more housing for people than for cars."

Unfortunately, if you say, "eliminate parking mandates," too many people hear "eliminate parking." But that just isn't true. In Seattle, 70 percent of post-reform housing developments included parking, and in Buffalo it was 83 percent. It's simply about giving developers the flexibility to respond to consumer demand.

"No developer is going to propose a project that isn't marketable due to a lack of parking," said Jesse Kanson-Benanav, executive director of Abundant Housing Massachusetts.

Often Based on Bias, Not Data

Parking mandates are often based on little or no data. Post-reform housing development in Buffalo has come with 20 percent fewer spaces than would have been required under the previous code; in Seattle it's 40 percent.

There's compelling evidence that Boston-area municipalities also routinely overestimate parking demand. For its "Metro Boston Perfect Fit Parking Initiative," the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) spent three years measuring demand for and supply of parking in Boston and 13 surrounding communities and found a 30 percent oversupply. The imbalance between supply and demand was observed in every municipality.

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MAPC recommended that cities and towns require fewer parking spaces – or none at all. They also urged municipalities not to make people pay for parking they don't need in the form of higher rents and found that less parking means more affordable housing.

In addition to giving municipalities and developers flexibility to respond to parking demand, eliminating mandates would also allow them to better respond to demographic changes. Today, urban residents – and younger ones in

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particular – are less likely to own cars and more likely to take advantage of options such as ride hailing and bike sharing. Yet while behaviors evolve and change, the specifics of municipal parking mandates rarely do.

Beacon Hill Can Effect Change

It's easy to forget that small businesses are also subject to parking mandates. Daniel Herriges, policy director for the Parking Reform Network, uses the example of a childcare center where parents quickly drop off and pick up their kids, but the higher rent caused by the mandate can be the difference between making it and having to shut down.

There is the potential for statewide legislative relief. The current state Senate version of an in-progress YIMBY (Yes in My Backyard) Bill would prohibit parking mandates within half a mile of transit stops and allow no more than one parking space per unit in multifamily housing that's more than half a mile from a transit station.

Cambridge is among the more than 100 U.S. cities that have eliminated parking mandates, according to the Parking Reform Network. While Boston has eliminated them for affordable housing, parking too often becomes a chip that developers have to negotiate away as a project makes its way through the permitting process.

In weighing the wisdom of public policy reforms, we often spend too little time considering the cost of inaction. In this case, it means building fewer housing units and making the ones we do build more expensive. With results from cities as different as Buffalo and Seattle and evidence from right here in our backyard, the time has come to boost housing production by eliminating onerous parking mandates. ◀

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