



# Rethinking Residential Parking

*Myths*  
&  
**FACTS**

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**T**he amount of parking at a residential development, particularly affordable housing developments is often a controversial issue. Concerned about the impact of new residents, local officials, planners, traffic engineers sometimes require or request building more parking than may be required. Most of the concerns about parking are related the issue of new traffic or congestion on-street parking. However, many of the preconceived notions about the need for parking in housing developments are contradicted by a significant amount of research and facts. And, in practice, these preconceived notions often create results that exacerbate the underlying concerns.

For an individual development, excess parking drives up the cost of the housing and reduces the potential for other amenities like open space and child care facilities. On a larger scale, all of this excess parking wastes public investments in transit, consumes open space, contributes to traffic congestion, and even encourages more car ownership. Reexamining these conceptions about parking in light of the facts can lead to smarter parking policies and an improved quality of life in Bay Area communities.

In the Summer and Fall of 2000, the Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California (NPH) set out to study parking policies and how they affect affordable housing developments. The study set out to identify critical criteria which jurisdictions could use to set appropriate parking standards as well as identify best practices and creative solutions.

For other resources on affordable housing and parking needs, please visit the NPH website, [www.nonprohousing.org](http://www.nonprohousing.org).

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## Myth #1 **Residential parking is not that expensive.**

A parking space in a parking lot usually consumes over 300 square feet. This translates to higher housing costs. For example, in the South Bay, the combination of high parking requirements and high land costs is debilitating to affordable housing developers. Land prices can reach \$1.5 million an acre and parking requirements can exceed two spaces per housing unit. In this situation, surface parking spaces cost over \$10,000 for land alone, greater than 20,000 per housing unit.

Total costs of parking structures can be exorbitant. One comprehensive study found an average exceeding \$25,000 per space.<sup>1</sup> Two newly approved parking garages in downtown Palo Alto are expected to cost over \$50,000 per space.

Estimates using Bay Area market conditions showed that in urban areas an additional parking space per unit increases the

development cost per unit by 21 percent or \$29,000. Our analysis also showed that increasing the parking spaces per unit created a bias towards building housing in greenfield areas instead of urban, transit-served areas.

A 1998 statistical study of house and condominium sales in San Francisco revealed that the inclusion of a parking space increased the price of the unit by \$46,000 and \$39,000.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, if more parking means higher cost, less parking can mean more affordable housing. Given the housing affordability crisis in the Bay Area, our priority of accommodating cars at the expense of affordability needs to be reexamined.

## Senior Housing in San Leandro

### **Community Visioning Process Turns Neighbors from Opponents to Advocates for Reduced Parking**

Requirements for off-street parking at affordable housing developments are often driven by community concerns over the potential of spillover parking. Planning departments and commissions as well as zoning boards are particularly sensitive to neighborhood concerns. Thus, a well-informed community is an essential part of implementing smart parking policies.

An affordable senior housing complex being developed by American Baptist Homes of the West and designed by Pyatok Associates is a role model for community participation and education. Following a community outreach process, residents supported and defended the developer's request for reduced parking to local officials.

As is typical, the community began with concerns over both parking congestion and other issues about affordable housing development. Designers approached the community with a blank slate, using Styrofoam blocks to allow them to come up with their own layout for the 1.5 acre site. Community members were instructed to come up with designs with varying degrees of parking. This communicated to residents the design implications of additional parking on this particular site. Providing parking at the minimums mandated by the city (1.5 per unit) would force the parking lot onto the street frontage.

In the meantime, the developers shared their experience with parking at similar affordable senior housing developments. After four community meetings, most community members were behind a parking ratio of 1 space per unit. Feeling ownership of a project they had a hand in designing, many residents then supported the project as it went in front of the San Leandro's Planning Commission and Board of Zoning Adjustments. Community support was essential in approving the project with a reduced parking ratio. As a result, the 60 units of affordable (50 percent or less of

Area Median Income) 1 bedroom apartments will be constructed with 43 resident and staff stalls, and 17 visitor stalls. The reduced requirement saved the space and cost of 30 parking spaces. With less parking, the project will provide more gardening space for residents, more landscaped areas instead of asphalt, and more total units.



Neighbors review parking provisions as they contribute to the design process during a community meeting.

## Myth #2 **Increasing the parking in a development can protect the aesthetic character and quality of life in a neighborhood.**

**In general, more parking spaces will make a development unattractive in the case of surface parking lots, and more massive in the case of parking structures.** If less parking is built, architects can use a building design that is less bulky (i.e. attached townhomes instead of multi-story units) and reflect a neighborhood's context.

**Less parking also leads to more attractive designs.** Anyone who has been in an older Bay Area neighborhood has probably noticed attractive apartment buildings like the courtyard style housing that was prevalent in California and wondered, "Why don't they build stuff like that anymore?" A main answer is that those developments were not required to build certain amounts of parking. Many of the unattractive, sixties-style apartments that neighborhoods feel are so out of character are the result of mandating parking requirements. Having to "fit

in the parking" drives the design process housing developments and eliminates opportunities to incorporate open space. And since an additional space can increase the costs, high minimum parking requirements reduce the money that can be spent on quality materials and architects.

While safety is a large concern for all communities, wanting more parking for nearby developments can be counter to those concerns. **Surface parking lots are unattractive and can be unsafe.** Justice Department statistics show that nearly 40 percent of violent crimes occur in parking lots.<sup>3</sup> Also, increased parking reduces the capability of a project to provide ground floor uses that put eyes on the street, provide neighborhood services and make street more active and vibrant.

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## Myth #3 **Affordable housing in particular needs more parking.**

This stereotype about affordable housing, is exactly that, a stereotype. **Simply put, higher income households own significantly more vehicles than lower income households.** In 17 studies on vehicle ownership, income was found to be a significant driver of vehicle ownership.<sup>3</sup> This pattern holds throughout the Bay Area. In the 1990 census, households earning between \$20,000 and \$25,000 owned on average only 1.30 vehicles, 26 percent below the region wide average of 1.76 cars. And 28 percent of households earning between \$10,000 and \$15,000 did not own a vehicle at all. By comparison, 10 percent

of households region wide lived without a car. Additionally, most affordable housing is built near transit service, which reduces the need for a first or second car in many households.

In the Bay Area, minimum parking requirements do not recognize this fact and reduce their parking requirements for affordable housing. Outside of the Bay Area, cities such as Los Angeles, Santa Monica and San Diego have provided reductions in their development regulations for affordable housing.\*

\* Affordable housing refers to housing that is legally restricted to be available for households of certain income levels.

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## Myth #4 **People will own the same amounts of cars regardless of transit service, neighborhood characteristics and amount of parking spaces.**

**Numerous studies of other regions, the Bay Area and San Francisco have shown that vehicle ownership is lower in neighborhoods that provide quality alternatives to driving such as neighborhood shopping and frequent, high quality transit service.**<sup>4</sup> For example, residents of San Francisco's wealthy Nob Hill on average own a quarter vehicles of households in suburban San Ramon. In our survey of affordable housing developments, the most congested parking occurred

in low-density areas with weak transit service and few neighborhood amenities. Transit service should improve as the Bay Area invests millions in the system. And neighborhood services can be improved by a project that provides ground floor retail instead of ground floor parking. **Thus, reduced parking can actually serve to reduce a whole neighborhood's aggregate need for vehicles, miles driven and congestion.**

## Using Parking Policy to Encourage Affordable Housing Near Transit: The City of Los Angeles

Most Bay Area residents associate Los Angeles with car ownership. However, in the city of Los Angeles, 22 percent of rental households do not own cars, and a high proportion of zero or single car households are low income.<sup>6</sup> The City of Los Angeles recognized the relationships between income, transit service and vehicle ownership when it set its minimum parking requirements. Parking requirements are reduced as an incentive to produce permanently affordable housing (i.e. legally restricted to certain income levels).

The minimum parking policies (shown in the chart to the right) are sensible for a number of reasons. They are focused on the possibility of households owning a second car. Since it is likely that households will own one car in Los Angeles due to its general auto orientation, the minimum 1 per unit requirement is unchanged for affordable housing. However, the requirements recognize that lower income households are less likely to indulge in owning a second vehicle. Thus requirements are reduced for units with 4 or more habitable rooms from 2.0 spaces to 1.5 spaces per unit. This corresponds to statistical evidence, while vehicle ownership increases on average as household size grows, this trend is not as evident in low-income households.

The potential that access to quality transit service to reduce the need for owning a second car is recognized with the reduction of required spaces to 1 per

unit from 1.5 for affordable units within 1,500 feet of significant transit service. By coupling the transit based reduction and income based reduction, the City of Los Angeles' minimum parking requirements reflect what transportation researchers have generally concluded: lower income residents, when given quality transit options are likely to forego ownership of a first or second car, even while higher income households will continue to own vehicles despite access to transit (except in extremely well served areas like some neighborhoods in San Francisco and Manhattan).

### City of Los Angeles Minimum Parking Requirements

(Spaces per Unit)

|   | Number of Habitable Rooms per Unit |     |     |
|---|------------------------------------|-----|-----|
|   | 1-2                                | 3   | 4+  |
| Market Rate Housing   | 1.0                                | 1.5 | 2.0 |
| Restricted Affordable Housing   | 1.0                                | 1.5 | 1.5 |
| Restricted Affordable Units within 1,500 feet of mass transit or major bus line | 1.0                                | 1.0 | 1.0 |

Source: City of Los Angeles zoning code at: <http://www.cityofla.org/PLN/zoning.HTM> (data from US Census, 2000).

## Myth #5

### **Senior housing needs just as much parking as other developments.**

Seniors own in significantly fewer vehicles and thus generate lower demand for parking. **In the Bay Area, households with all members aged 62 and above own 31 percent fewer cars than households with no seniors. Nationwide, renting households with all members aged 65 or older own an average of 0.6 vehicles versus a national average household rate of 1.9 vehicles for households with no seniors.** Some Bay Area cities like San Francisco, El Cerrito, and Berkeley reduce their parking

requirements for housing that will serve seniors (and the disabled) while others may or may not allow a fewer spaces on a case by case basis. Other jurisdictions are less flexible. A jurisdiction requiring 2 or more spaces per unit for senior housing seems to make little sense given these statistics. If a senior housing development is near quality transit options, then the need for parking is further reduced.

## Myth #6

### **People are unwilling to live in housing without a parking space.**

In very suburban settings, car-free housing is not very feasible. However, in urban settings this is not necessarily the case. **The 1998 study on San Francisco home sales showed that single-family homes and condominiums sold 5 and 41 days quicker, respectively, if they did not contain an off-street parking space.**<sup>5</sup> The market preferred the lower-cost, car-free housing units over the more expensive housing with parking. Clearly, the quality of transit service and the proximity of services like shopping and restaurants in many neighborhoods in San Francisco make vehicle ownership more an option than a necessity.

**A 1997 survey of 12 affordable housing developments in transit served areas in San Francisco revealed underused off-street parking in 10 projects even though the city's minimum parking requirement is only one space per unit.**

In San Francisco, City CarShare is partnering with housing developers to include parking for car-sharing vehicles. This can give many households the convenience of a car while reducing the number of parking spaces needed.

## Myth #7

### **While reduced parking may work in the Bay Area's big cities, new policies in suburban cities are not necessary.**

The average lower density and lower intensity of transit service in suburban cities generally makes the ownership of at least 1 vehicle per household a necessity. However, minimum parking requirements often require building greater than 2 spaces per unit. **Within every city, including ones that are generally considered suburban, there are areas with more density, neighborhood services, and higher quality transit options.** Unfortunately, in most of these jurisdictions, the parking requirement does not change to reflect these differences. As more suburban downtowns are revitalized and seen as a place for housing, these general parking requirements should be reexamined. Additionally, with increasing investments in transit in areas considered suburban (i.e. light-rail in Santa Clara county, BART from Fremont to San Jose), more housing near that transit is necessary to make the investment worthwhile. In these areas, the higher parking requirements reduce the amount of housing that is possible to build and encourage driving over transit use. **Transit-oriented development is unlikely to succeed in its goal of generating transit usage and alleviating congestion, if parking is free and plentiful.**

## Myth #8

### **Adding more parking to a development will reduce its impact on congestion in the neighborhood.**

**High parking levels work in a cycle that actually increases congestion.** In housing, here's how it works: lots of parking means its price is "free" (despite its cost), free parking reduces the cost of, and thus increases the rate of car ownership, more vehicles means more driving on local roads. Breaking the cycle means ending mandates for high parking supplies. This way developers and property managers can offer rent rebates to residents who forego owning a first or second car. Fewer cars mean more trips by walking and on transit, which serve to reduce neighborhood congestion.

More parking also reduces the amount of housing on a particular site. An increase of one space per unit, can decrease units by 25 percent. **Fewer units reduce the potential for both quality transit service and neighborhood services, which present alternatives to driving.** Numerous studies have shown that higher densities are essential to reduce rates of car ownership and miles driven.<sup>6</sup> Thus, while in some ways counter intuitive, more units and less parking can work to reduce congestion.

## California Park Apartments

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### ***A Landscape Reserve and Local Discretion Allays Community Concerns & Provides More Open Space in Suburban, Affordable, Transit-Oriented Housing.***

Many suburban communities think they have little option but to accommodate the car. In Palo Alto, the local government recognizes that parking needs differ when you are dealing with affordable housing at a location near real transit service. California Park Apartments, developed in 1989, is situated adjacent to the California Avenue Caltrain station. The development provides 45 units of affordable family housing (2, 3, and 4 bedroom flats and town homes) on 1.7 acres.

If built according to Palo Alto's standard parking requirements, the 45 units would have been accompanied by 95 parking spaces. The nearby train station, bus stops and numerous nearby shops and restaurants led the developer and local planners to believe that all of those parking spaces may not have been necessary. Palo Alto's zoning code anticipated these situations and gives the planning director and the architectural review board discretion in "deferring" the standard minimum parking requirements. This allows the developer to hold open space in "landscape reserve" for additional parking if it is determined that the initial parking is insufficient. If parking demand is too high, the open space will be converted to parking spaces.

At California Park, Palo Alto Housing Corporation was permitted to build 73, instead of 95 parking spaces. In the open space, a family play area was installed that includes a sandlot, some play equipment, two picnic tables and a barbeque.

Since the development opened, the reduced parking has been sufficient and there are no plans to convert the "landscape reserve" family

play area to parking. The landscape reserve policy is useful in two ways, first it addresses community concerns that reduced parking will cause on-street parking congestion, and second, it highlights the trade-off between parking and amenities such as open-space. Also, by giving the local planning department discretion in the zoning code, Palo Alto has recognized that a one-size fits all minimum parking requirement is not appropriate for the whole city.



California Park Apartments

## Shattuck Senior Homes – Car Free Housing for Seniors in Downtown Berkeley Has a Market

Senior households tend to rely heavily on transit or para-transit (i.e. dial-a-ride services). In particular, low-income seniors own fewer vehicles. The city of Berkeley and Affordable Housing Associates (AHA), a non-profit developer recognized this when they planned a senior housing development in Berkeley's downtown area. While all senior housing should not necessarily be car-free, it made sense for 2425 Shattuck. The 27 unit development is located on a half-acre in Berkeley's pedestrian friendly downtown, which has nearby shops, restaurants, and services and excellent transit service in the form of the downtown Berkeley BART station and a number of AC Transit bus lines. By developing car free, AHA was able to get four more units on the site and Berkeley was able to retain the pedestrian feel of its downtown.

Because the city feared that residents would simply park on the street, AHA agreed to restrict residents from obtaining residential parking permits. During the leasing phase, potential residents were told of the lack of off-street parking and the permit restrictions. That didn't prevent 2425 Shattuck from leasing up quickly due to the important need that the housing served. If residents needed to keep their cars, they could apply at other AHA development or they could use one of the parking garages downtown. Only five out of 300 applicants withdrew their applications due to the parking restrictions.

Shattuck Senior Homes serves seniors earning between 40 and 50 percent of area median income. Low income and advanced age reduce the likelihood of car ownership. Along with the quality public transit in the area, the residents transportation needs are met with regular para-transit (such as dial a ride vans

and scheduled van trips to grocery stores) supported by government programs.

Shattuck Senior Homes is an important example of sensible planning and win-win policies that facilitate increasing housing for a needy population.



Shattuck Senior Homes

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*For more information about this study, please contact NPH at (415) 989-8160. "Parking & Housing: Best Practices for Increasing Housing Affordability and Achieving Smart Growth" will be published in the Summer of 2001.*