

**Parking. Do we really know what we're asking for?** When a new affordable housing development is proposed, neighbors and public officials often express concerns about the impact of new residents on traffic or existing on-street parking. While these concerns are understandable, they are often based on inaccurate assumptions because data on parking needs is unfortunately not widely known or used. As a result, communities often require more parking for affordable housing than is truly needed.

This brochure provides information from NPH's 2000 study on the affects of parking requirements on affordable housing development. By answering "what does parking really cost us?" and "how much parking do we really need?", this brochure addresses key community development issues for low-income people in the San Francisco Bay Area. Among the findings were the relatively low car ownership rates for lower income households, seniors, and residents of pedestrian and transit friendly neighborhoods.

**Excess parking has costs for all of us.** For an individual housing development, excess parking requirements drives up costs and reduces the potential for other amenities such as open space child care facilities, or even a neighborhood coffee shop. On a larger scale, all of this excess parking consumes lots of land, contributes to traffic congestion, and , ironically, even encourages more car ownership.

As the Bay Area attempts to find strategies for "smart growth," we need to focus on sustainable solutions to congestion and competition for limited land. So, this brochure ends with descriptions of "smarter" parking policies, ideas that are crucial to creating and maintaining livable Bay Area communities.

## What Does Parking Really Cost Us?



Residential parking requirements have real monetary costs. One comprehensive study found that on average, the cost of providing parking in the Bay Area exceeds \$25,000 per space. For affordable housing, the money spent on creating parking reduces the funding available to create more housing. In addition, more parking reduces the amount of housing on a particular site. An increase of one space per unit can decrease units by 25 percent.

Thus, if more parking means higher costs, lower parking requirements enables communities to create more housing with less land and money.

**Higher parking requirements lead to less attractive designs.** Anyone who has

been in an older Bay Area neighborhood has probably noticed attractive apartments buildings like courtyard style housing and wondered, "Why don't they build stuff like that anymore?" A primary answer is that those developments were not required to build minimum amounts of parking. Having to "fit in the parking" drives the design process and eliminates opportunities to incorporate open space. Also, increased parking reduces the capability of a project to provide ground floor uses that provide neighborhood services and make streets more active and vibrant. **In general, more parking spaces will make a development unattractive in the case of surface 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 and reflect a neighborhood's context.



The Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California (NPH) strives to preserve, develop, and manage quality housing, along with appropriate supportive services, to improve the lives of those in need, as well as revitalize and enhance communities and neighborhoods, through the support and promotion of non-profit housing development corporations.

A decent, safe, affordable home for every Northern California resident is the ultimate goal of NPH.

NPH is a non-profit, 501 (c)(3) tax-exempt corporation formed in 1979 by nonprofit housing development sponsors in Northern California. NPH is a membership association made up primarily of non-profit organizations sponsoring, developing, owning, or managing rental or cooperative housing for low-income people. Membership is open to all supporters of nonprofit housing.

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**Planning for Residential Parking: A Guide for Housing Developers and Planners** is available on the NPH website at [www.nonprofithousing.org](http://www.nonprofithousing.org).



*The complete report, Smart Growth in Action: Best Practice Parking Policies for Compact Residential Developments in the San Francisco Bay Area will be released in the Summer of 2001.*



# Rethinking Residential Parking



*Costs, Needs, and Solutions*

Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California (NPH)

# How Much Parking Do We Need?



Parking needs vary a great deal by income. **Higher income households own significantly more vehicles than lower income households.** In 17 studies on vehicle ownership, income was found to be a significant predictor of vehicle ownership. 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.

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.

Seniors, not surprisingly, own 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.**



In view of this fact, some Bay Area cities like San Francisco, El Cerrito, and Berkeley reduce their parking requirements for housing that will serve seniors (and the disabled). Other jurisdictions are less flexible. A jurisdiction requiring the same parking requirements per unit makes little sense given these statistics



Where we live is another major factor in regard to car ownership. **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.** For example, residents of San Francisco's wealthy Nob Hill on average own a quarter vehicles of households in suburban San Ramon. This disparity is likely due to the proximity of services and public transit in Nob Hill that make driving unnecessary. Requiring more parking than is needed in these types of neighborhoods only increases the cost of the housing and undermines the character of those communities.

A common belief is that people won't buy or rent housing without a parking space. It is true that car-free housing is not very feasible in very suburban settings. However, in urban settings this is not necessarily the case. **A 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.** 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 such as shopping and restaurants in many neighborhoods in San Francisco make vehicle ownership more an option than a necessity.



# SOLUTIONS

Based on NPH's findings, it is clear that parking requirements for affordable housing in some areas could and should be changed to reflect the actual parking needs based on resident population and neighborhood context. Some areas have already done this:

- The City of Palo Alto's zoning codes give the planning director and the architectural review board discretion in "deferring" the standard minimum parking requirements when appropriate, as with transit-oriented affordable housing developments. 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.
- 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. The City of Los Angeles recognized the relationships between income, transit service and vehicle ownership when it set the following minimum parking requirements:

	# Habitable Rooms/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	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).

While one clear solution to unnecessary parking guidelines is changing requirements for affordable housing developments, another solution is to change future parking needs by providing residents with alternatives to driving. Demand management for parking is possible depending on the community. The development of walkable communities that combine retail, services, and residential buildings reduce the need and use of cars. Within every city, including ones that are generally considered suburban, there are areas with more density, neighborhood services, and higher quality transit options. As more suburban downtowns are revitalized and seen as a place for housing, parking requirements should be reexamined.

Another demand management strategy is to provide sufficient public transportation, including car-share options. 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 total parking spaces needed in the city. For more information, visit [www.sfcarsshare.org](http://www.sfcarsshare.org).

Reducing parking spaces may in fact further reduce driving rates. **High parking levels work in a cycle that actually increases congestion.** Numerous studies have shown that higher densities are essential to reduce rates of car ownership and miles driven. Thus, while in some ways counter intuitive, more units and less parking can work to reduce congestion.