

TO: Zoning & Planning Committee, City Council

FROM: Andreae Downs, Alicia Bowman, Vicki Danberg, Josh Krintzman, Alison Leary, Brenda Noel, Jake Auchincloss

RE: Parking Minimums and Zoning Goals

COUNCILORS ALBRIGHT, AUCHINCLOSS, BOWMAN, CROSSLEY, DANBERG, DOWNS, GENTILE, GREENBERG, KALIS, KELLEY, LIPOF, MARKIEWICZ, NOEL, KRINTZMAN, AND RYAN seeking amendments to Chapter of the Revised City of Newton Ordinances to eliminate mandated parking minimums to improve vitality of local businesses, reduce the cost of housing, and support the climate action goals

This memo outlines how removing parking minimums from Newton's Zoning Code meet the three goals passed unanimously by the Zoning and Planning committee earlier this year:

- Housing: A zoning code more responsive to a demand for housing that **serves a range of incomes**. Promote sustainable community development patterns.
- Sustainability: **Environmental stewardship, fiscal strength** and meeting community needs.
- Context: **Preserve and protect what we like** in our neighborhoods. Encourage new development to **fit in the context** of our neighborhoods and villages.

### What are "Parking Minimums"?

Parking minimums are zoning laws that **require** private businesses and residences to provide a certain number of parking spaces. Historically, government has done a bad job of estimating the number of parking spots needed for each use. Removing parking minimums would allow developers and businesses to determine what they need without government mandates.

Lifting these government mandates does NOT eliminate parking in private development. Rather, it removes governmental guesswork about how many parking spaces might be ideal. The formulas currently used **by government** are unproven and based on the assumption that every trip will be taken by car. Their effect, as we show below, is potentially damaging to our historic villages and bucolic neighborhoods.

Parking minimums are a subsidy for driving. Everyone in a development created with a parking minimum, including those who cannot or do not drive, is therefore required **by government policy** to pay for parking in their rent, in lost tax revenue, or in higher costs for goods and services.

### Neighborhood Desirability

Parking minimums inhibit the creation of walkable neighborhoods, and the most sought-after kind of housing: near jobs, services, schools parks, transit, etc. (see 15-minute neighborhoods<sup>1</sup>)

How? Excess parking takes up space and adds distance between destinations. It also adds cost.

### Housing for a range of incomes

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2019/9/6/7-rules-for-creating-15-minute-neighborhoods>

In the United States, there is an estimated 990 sq ft of (off road) parking space for every car in the US, while there is only 800 sq ft of residential space for each person.<sup>2</sup> This ratio does not just highlight the relative imbalance of cars vs. people, it actively works against housing production.

- Preventing Development
  - The cost of fulfilling parking minimums is prohibitive for smaller developers, with surface parking costing about \$10,000 per spot, which constitutes ~10% of total development costs.<sup>3</sup>
  - On some lots, there is not enough space to fulfill the parking minimum requirements, so developers must abandon projects.<sup>4</sup>
- Increasing the burden on middle- and low-income residents
  - In our region, a minimum requirement of two parking spots per unit can increase the cost of a 1,600 sq ft low-income residence by \$64,000 for the developer, and those costs then transfer to the tenant whether or not they own a car.<sup>5</sup>

### **Environmental Stewardship**

- Environmental Harm
  - A 2015 Transportation Bureau report indicated that an “increase from 0.1 to 0.5 parking spaces provided per resident corresponds with a 30 percent increase in commuter automobile mode share.”<sup>6</sup> This increase in cars subsequently increases the levels of traffic congestion<sup>7</sup> and increases tailpipe and greenhouse gas emissions from passenger cars, which are part of the category of vehicle travel that accounts for 60% of greenhouse gas emissions in the transportation sector.<sup>8</sup>
  - Excessive available parking results in fewer people using more environmentally friendly forms of transportation such as walking, biking, or taking public transportation.
  - Newton’s [Climate Action Plan](#) (11/16/19) specifically recommends reducing parking minimums—and thus increasing the demand for more sustainable transportation options—as a key component of the City’s meeting its transportation emissions goals and reduction in heat island effects.

### **Fiscal Strength**

Land in Newton is finite. Land dedicated to parking cannot be put to a more productive use—it represents an opportunity cost, as well as a loss for our tax base.

Examples within the same zoning: Vergilio’s Echo Bridge Restaurant at the corner of Chestnut and Eliot in Upper Falls is valued at \$884,200<sup>9</sup>, or \$80/sf. Its parking lot next door—with almost the same land

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.citylab.com/perspective/2019/09/parking-lot-urban-planning-transit-street-traffic-congestion/598504/>

<sup>3</sup> [Metro Boston Perfect Fit Parking Initiative | Phase II Report](#), Page 29

<sup>4</sup> [3 Major Problems with Parking Minimums — Strong Towns](#)

<sup>5</sup> Todd Litman, “Parking Requirement Impacts on Housing Affordability” (Victoria Transport Policy Institute, August 24, 2016) <https://vtpi.org/park-hou.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> [Metro Boston Perfect Fit Parking Initiative | Phase II Report](#), Page 28

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Newton Assessor’s Database

area, is valued at \$345,400, or \$31.23/sf. Nearby, the two houses at 394 and 404 Eliot are valued at \$90-\$100 sf. The parking lot just east of them is valued at \$15.92/sf (Note: while in the identical zone—MR2—this lot is unbuildable, according to Newton’s assessors, because it is used to meet the minimum parking requirement for the Antiques Mall across the street. For most of the last 25 years, the lot has been roped off and sitting empty<sup>10</sup>).

Requiring more parking using a unproven and discredited formulas rather than managing it effectively means vast swaths of even our most valuable land sit empty (the private lots in this photo are underutilized.)<sup>11</sup>

Figure 2-12 Example: Restricted Use/Private Lots Off of Lyman Street



Even improved lots have more value with less parking. In Newton Centre, for example, 780 Beacon—which has a parking lot and drive-through—is valued at \$76/sf. 790 Beacon, which is small retail—no parking or driveway, pencils out at \$361/sf (land sf).<sup>12</sup>

Not only is parking expensive to build, its replacement cost is high.<sup>13</sup>

### Neighborhood Context and Historic Development Patterns

Newton’s iconic neighborhoods, homes and commercial centers were mostly built before cars and parking minimums.

Pre-1950s houses featured porches and front-doors first, garages and driveways were tucked next to, under, or behind the main features. Stores were built to the sidewalk, cheek-by-jowl to encourage strolling and window-shopping.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Allan Cohen, commercial assessor, City of Newton, 11/12/20

<sup>11</sup> Newton Centre Parking Study, Feb. 2016, p 2-12

<sup>12</sup> While this is also partly because the bank lot can hold only one business while the divisible nearby retail/office lot holds several, the fact that most of the lot is covered in pavement is part of the reason for the single-tenant capacity.

<sup>13</sup> Mortgage Bankers Association study

[https://www.mba.org/Documents/Research/RIHA/18806\\_Research\\_RIHA\\_Parking\\_Report.pdf](https://www.mba.org/Documents/Research/RIHA/18806_Research_RIHA_Parking_Report.pdf) , p 1

Much of that neighborhood-facing, community-enhancing feel is lost in residential neighborhoods when parking takes the place of yards and porches. In those neighborhoods where parking and garages dominate the streetscape, walking is less pleasurable or social. In fact, large driveway entrances endanger pedestrians by allowing speedy turns onto the street.

Our village centers, likewise, are viable and walkable in part because most of them do not conform to current parking minimums—in fact, Council regularly waives them. We should instead lift them entirely.

## **Conclusion**

Our argument is not to eliminate parking—many residents drive and wish to have a place to park. Rather, particularly in our walkable neighborhoods near transit, services and shops, we strongly suggest that the City stop requiring a minimum number of parking spaces<sup>14</sup>. The formulas used are unproven and based on the assumption that every trip will be taken by car. The effect on our historic villages and nearby neighborhoods is potentially damaging, as noted above.

Parking minimums are a subsidy for driving. They make it harder to meet our climate goals. Not only do they discourage transit use, walking and biking, everyone, including those who cannot or do not drive, pays for parking in their rent, in lost tax revenue, or in higher costs for goods and services. By removing parking minimums, Newton would start to allow the market to determine the “right amount” of parking.

## **Recommendations**

Establish context-sensitive parking standards, not one standard across Newton. These should be mapped by walk score<sup>15</sup>, not by the current pattern, which does not account for walkability.

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<sup>14</sup> Areas with no adjacent transit, shopping or services will of course see higher car usage and higher parking demand. The market already is primed to provide spaces in new construction and renovations in these areas, and the city should continue to allow provision of parking.

<sup>15</sup> A measure of access via walking. See <https://www.walkscore.com/methodology.shtml>