



The Austin City Council Decides to Eliminate Parking Requirements for All Land Uses Everywhere

On May 4, 2023, the Austin City Council [adopted](#) a policy to “eliminate minimum off-street motor vehicle parking requirements in the City.” Once implemented through a code amendment, the developer or property owner gets to decide whether or not to provide off-street parking for its employees, customers, or residential tenants or to instead shift that generated parking to the public streets. This precipitous action will create congestion and unsafe conditions for drivers and neighborhood residents and limit access to public facilities, such as schools that depend on the availability of on-street parking.

You can be forgiven if you have not heard of this sudden policy change, because there was no public notice other than a posting on the Council Message Board—a site generally visited only by city hall insiders—nine days before the meeting. The council did not consult with schools, parents, neighborhoods, or others who would have welcomed a chance to provide input *before* the policy was adopted and the code amendments set in motion. There was no process, no hearings, and no discussion at the Council Work Session. At the council meeting, there was no staff presentation. The resolution was placed on [the “consent” portion of the agenda](#), and there was no debate or even discussion among the members other than self-congratulatory statements. The mayor and all council members except for Council Member Alison Alter voted in favor of the new policy throwing out the existing parking rules for no rules.

It is true that requiring too *much* parking can have unintended adverse consequences, including the underutilization of land, added construction costs that are passed on to the consumer, and the facilitation of vehicular travel where and when other less environmentally impactful travel modes (like available mass transit, biking or walking) are feasible and should be encouraged. But it is also true that providing too *little* off-street parking has unintended adverse consequences. These include increased traffic and congestion, with corresponding negative environmental implications (caused

by drivers [cruising](#) for parking spaces), illegal parking, and excessive curb parking on nearby neighborhood streets, creating mobility and safety problems for residents. Safety problems are especially critical on narrow neighborhood streets with no sidewalks. ([According to the Austin Public Works Department](#), Austin is missing around 1,600 miles of sidewalks.)

Also, in some locations businesses with inadequate parking monopolize on-street parking spaces needed for public facilities, such as schools where parents and visitors need a place to park. Ironically, eliminating on-site parking allows for a bigger building, which can mean more traffic needing more parking.

Instead of a simplistic approach that throws the baby out with the bathwater, the council should have thoughtfully addressed problems of over-parking and under-parking with a comprehensive, data-driven process. Such a resolution would have directed city staff to evaluate our existing parking regulations as applied in the community to determine the conditions under which, or the uses for which, our parking requirements fail to align with the public's parking needs. This, coupled with a thorough review of published studies and the careful cataloging and comparison of the experience of other cities that have reduced or eliminated parking, would enable the city to determine the conditions under which a reduction or planned-for elimination of on-site parking leads to a measurable decrease in site-generated trips (trip counts) or vehicle miles traveled (VTM). The goal would be to develop recommendations for an approval process that produces context-sensitive parking requirements tailored to the use, the location, and the available alternative transportation options and utilizing all available on-street and off-street parking management strategies to provide the safest and most efficient use of our space and our streets. If on-site parking standards are too stringent in some circumstances, they should be reduced; if they are too lax in some cases, they should be strengthened; if they can be safely eliminated under certain conditions, in some areas, or for some projects, they should be eliminated. The solution is not to blindly throw out all minimum standards for everyone, everywhere, regardless of the consequences.

Instead of doing the hard work and instead of involving the community in developing a fact-based policy, the council abandoned its responsibility, took the easy way out, and left parking regulation to the market, reasoning that developers and businesses should have "the freedom to provide parking based on market demand." In doing so, the mayor and those council members voting for the resolution forgot the first rule of regulation: that regulations are not designed to protect the public from responsible actors who know what they are doing, but from those who aren't or don't. The mayor and council

members have left the public at the mercy of profiteers who cannot foresee or don't care about the impact their failure to provide parking will have on other businesses, drivers, and residents.

Even well-intentioned people will make mistakes. In recent years, the city has embraced a trend—which the council's resolution has now taken to the extreme—and reduced parking requirements in most of the central city. The day before the council vote, an affordable housing provider—who accepted most of the city's generous parking reductions premised on the projects' proximity to mass transit—was quoted as saying that the parking he ended up with “was not enough,” that families in the housing project need cars for daily living, mass transit notwithstanding, and that he supports “lowering parking minimums—but not getting rid of them entirely.”

*“A lot of developers will be smart and think about the market,” he said.
“Some will not. There's going to be some dumb mistakes made where people didn't really anticipate that they would need parking.”*

This is the type of real-world experience that the mayor and council members didn't want to hear when they decided, almost on a whim, to be trendy and completely “eliminate minimum off-street motor vehicle parking requirements in the City.”

The no-parking minimums policy, when implemented, will leave the community to deal with developers and business owners' “dumb mistakes,” particularly in residential neighborhoods whose narrow streets weren't designed or intended to be commercial parking lots. It will also and not insignificantly relegate those with special needs to designated parking spaces on the curb.

Austin deserves better.