

# People & Planet Over Parking

Eliminating parking minimums, in conjunction with smart parking reform, is a crucial step for creating more affordable, sustainable, and vibrant communities in the North Bay. Outdated mandates inflate housing costs by forcing developers to build potentially unnecessary parking, wasting valuable land and encouraging car dependency. These requirements hinder the development of diverse housing and walkable, transit-friendly neighborhoods, which are key to a more livable future.

Instead of rigid mandates, eliminating minimums allows developers the flexibility to build parking based on actual demand for their project. In the cities of Buffalo and Seattle, research shows that 60-70% of new homes built after eliminating minimums would have been illegal under the previous parking mandates. In Seattle alone, more than 35,000 homes were built in the five years following the removal of parking minimums, homes that otherwise couldn't have been developed due to the excessive parking requirements<sup>1</sup>. In another example, Minneapolis eliminated parking minimums, amongst other zoning updates in 2020, as part of its 2040 Comprehensive Plan, resulting in a 116% increase in the development of 2-4 unit housing structures.<sup>2</sup>

## MYTHBUSTING

### MYTH

### FACT

Eliminating parking minimums means eliminating parking.

Removing parking minimums gives developers more flexibility. After Minneapolis eliminated parking mandates for certain developments, developers still provided parking but at levels appropriate for their projects.<sup>6</sup> Case studies show that removing minimums does not mean parking will disappear, but rather that developers will right-size parking based on actual demand.

Without parking minimums, there won't be enough parking for residents and visitors.

A study in Santa Rosa found that 74% of downtown parking spaces were vacant during peak hours, highlighting how parking supply often exceeds demand.<sup>7</sup> In many cases, even in high-traffic areas, parking minimums lead to an oversupply of parking spaces, and reducing or eliminating these requirements typically meets demand without causing shortages.

Parking minimums are necessary to ensure future parking capacity.

Sonoma County and its jurisdictions have, through various means, committed to reducing car dependency, not expanding it. Cities that prioritize sustainable transit options like biking, walking, and public transportation see lower demand for parking in the long term. The push for more parking capacity is based on outdated models of car-centric urban design.<sup>8</sup> Our communities thrive when we plan for fewer cars, not more.

Reducing parking minimums will hurt local businesses by making parking less available for customers.

Reducing parking minimums has helped cities foster stronger local economies and more vibrant communities. By lowering development costs and encouraging walkability, these reforms draw more foot traffic to businesses and encourage new business development.<sup>9</sup> Cities adopting parking reforms are giving small businesses room to grow. A 2022 Workforce Development Survey revealed that 63% of employers struggled with hiring, and 20% pointed to high housing and living costs as their top workforce concern.<sup>10</sup> The housing crisis is making it harder for local businesses to thrive.

Reducing parking minimums will cause neighborhood parking spillover.

Shared parking strategies and unbundled parking options can prevent spillover, while better public transit and walkable neighborhoods reduce the need for excessive parking. Case studies from Portland and Minneapolis show that with thoughtful planning, reduced parking minimums do not lead to significant parking issues in adjacent areas.<sup>11</sup>

The financial impact of parking minimums cannot be overstated. These mandates force developers to build more parking than is often necessary, adding between \$30,000 and \$80,000 per space to housing costs.<sup>3</sup> These forced expenses are typically passed on to residents through higher rents or home prices, reducing overall housing affordability. Constrained by tight financing, developers of subsidized housing must absorb the cost of parking, as residents are not directly affected. This added financial burden often makes projects unviable without additional investment or forced downsizing, often leading to fewer housing units built, if at all.<sup>4</sup>

Land use and preservation are critical concerns in Sonoma County and its jurisdictions. Eliminating parking minimums enables more efficient land utilization, often allowing for denser, more sustainable development, and better use of limited space.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, Sonoma County and its cities have committed to reducing car dependency by promoting walkability, bikability, public transit, and alternative transportation. Eliminating parking minimums supports these goals by curbing the demand for excessive, sprawling parking infrastructure, encouraging compact, transit-oriented communities, and preserving land for housing and green spaces.

We have a clear opportunity to embrace these forward-thinking reforms. Eliminating parking minimums and adopting more flexible parking policies are key steps in ensuring that the North Bay can boost housing production, accommodate growth while minimizing its environmental impact, and create communities that are more accessible, efficient, and resilient in the long term.

## How We Prioritized Parking Over People

Parking policies in the North Bay have their roots in mid-20th century urban planning, a time when car ownership was rapidly rising, and suburban development was seen as the future of modern living. During this era, cities across the U.S., including those in the North Bay, implemented parking minimums—requirements for developers to include a set number of parking spaces in new residential and commercial projects. These policies were designed to accommodate a growing number of vehicles, ensuring that people could easily access homes, businesses, and services by car.<sup>12</sup>

At the time, the goal of these parking mandates was to promote economic growth and urban expansion by providing sufficient parking for all users. The policies reflected the belief that cars were central to urban life and that cities needed to be built around the automobile. This approach led to the creation of expansive parking lots and garages, often in central urban areas, taking up valuable land that might otherwise have been used for housing or public spaces.

However, what may have made sense in the car-centric era of the 1950s no longer aligns with today's priorities. Cities now face different challenges—housing affordability, sustainable land use, and reducing carbon emissions—and yet these outdated parking requirements remain largely in place. They continue to impose rigid standards, requiring developers to build more parking

## CASE STUDY: Minneapolis Unit Permitting Changes Following the Implementation of Plan 2040 at the start of 2020

UNITS IN...	Single Family	2 Unit Structures	3-/4- Unit Structures	5+ Unit Structures	Total 2-4 Unit Structures	Total Multi-Family
2023	70	26	34	1,398	60	1,458
2022	55	16	47	3,563	63	3,626
2021	63	30	23	3,066	53	3,119
2020	79	30	24	3,207	54	3,261
<b>PLAN 2040 IMPLEMENTED</b>						
2019	122	24	21	4,646	45	4,691
2018	162	14	35	3,414	49	3,463
2017	137	17	7	2,094	24	2,118
2016	169	0	15	2,724	15	2,739
2015	122	2	11	1,354	13	1,367
2014	138	6	7	1,808	13	1,821
<b>2014-2019 Average</b>	141.67	10.50	16.00	2673.33	26.50	2699.83
<b>2020-2023 Average</b>	66.75	25.50	32.00	2808.50	57.50	2866.00
<b>Avg. Unit Difference</b>	-75	+15	+16	+135	+31	+166
<b>Average Difference</b>	-53%	+143%	+100%	+5%	+117%	+6%

Source: [socds.huduser.gov/permits](https://socds.huduser.gov/permits)

than is necessary, even as public transportation, biking, and walkable communities have become more common and desirable.

In the North Bay, this historical legacy persists. Despite evolving transportation needs and growing sustainability priorities, parking minimums remain a key feature of development policies. This results in large portions of land being allocated to parking, much of which is underutilized. For example, a 2022 study of downtown Santa Rosa revealed that 74% of parking spaces were vacant during peak hours, highlighting the inefficiency of maintaining such expansive parking infrastructure.<sup>13</sup>

These parking policies, rooted in a bygone era, now hinder efforts to create more affordable, walkable, and sustainable communities. Reforming them is critical to aligning with the region's current goals for smarter growth and better land use.

## Impacts of Parking Minimums

### Increased Housing Costs

Forcing developers to provide a set number of parking spaces in new projects inflates the cost of construction, particularly in urban areas where land is scarce. On average, each surface parking space adds between \$30,000 and \$50,000 to the cost of development.<sup>14</sup> For underground or structured parking, these costs can climb even higher.

For affordable housing developments, parking requirements often make projects financially unfeasible, forcing developers to either reduce the number of units or abandon the project entirely due to the high cost.<sup>15</sup> The added cost of parking is passed on to renters in market-rate developments, driving up the price of rent. This further exacerbates housing affordability by making units more expensive for residents and eliminating smaller, traditionally affordable units like Duplexes and Triplexes.

### Inefficient Use of Land

Parking minimums result in inefficient land use; large areas devoted to parking lots and garages often remain underutilized. As shown by the Santa Rosa study, 74% of parking spaces were vacant during peak hours in 2022.<sup>16</sup> This reflects a broader problem: cities are allocating prime land for parking that could be better used for housing, parks, or other community amenities.

In an era when affordable housing and green spaces are in high demand, dedicating land to parking lots is an outdated use of valuable urban land. This practice not only limits the potential for new housing but also encourages urban sprawl, pushing developments further from city centers and amenities, thus increasing car dependency and the impacts that brings.

We know car dependency has several negative impacts on people and communities. In 2022, roughly 16% of U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions were linked to small passenger vehicles and light duty trucks.<sup>17</sup> Increasing car dependency, therefore increasing car use, would only push these numbers up. Car dependency also negatively impacts the wallets of residents. Owning and maintaining a car are undeniably expensive. A report by the Bureau of Transportation Statistics showed that in 2022, households who owned at least one vehicle spent upwards of 38% of their after-tax income on transportation; while households with the same income who did not own or lease a vehicle spent as little as 5% of their after-tax income on transportation.<sup>18</sup> Increasing car dependency would increase the financial burden on residents already dealing with exorbitant housing costs.

### Economic Impact

Parking minimums stifle economic growth by limiting the development of mixed-use, walkable neighborhoods. In cities like Portland and Berkeley, where parking requirements have been eliminated, some businesses have seen increased foot traffic. By focusing less on parking, cities can foster vibrant, pedestrian-friendly areas that attract both residents and businesses.<sup>19</sup>

Overbuilding parking infrastructure also drains valuable city resources. Maintaining large, underused parking lots and garages diverts public funds that could be better spent on public spaces, transportation infrastructure, or housing. In Santa Rosa, for instance, the parking department reported a \$1.4 million operating deficit in 2022, largely due to free and reduced parking programs that have not succeeded in bringing parking usage back to pre-COVID levels.<sup>20</sup> By reforming parking requirements, cities like Santa Rosa could redirect resources toward investments that more directly contribute to community well-being and economic vitality.

### Environmental Consequences

Parking minimums encourage car ownership, contribute to traffic congestion, and lead to increased greenhouse gas emissions. When cities prioritize parking over public transit, biking, or walking, they reinforce a car-dependent culture that exacerbates the region's environmental challenges. The transportation sector is the largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in California, contributing about 50% of the state's greenhouse gas emissions;<sup>21</sup> reducing reliance on cars is key to meeting the state's climate goals.

Excessive parking mandates encourage urban sprawl, increase vehicle miles traveled, and make public transportation less viable. As developments spread further from urban cores, residents are forced to rely on cars, further increasing emissions. Reducing parking minimums would encourage more sustainable forms of transportation, which helps cities address climate change by lowering emissions and reducing traffic. Additionally, a reduction in parking minimums would allow for more dense development, and create walkable, mixed-use communities that reduce the need for long-term transportation and make public transit, biking, and walking more viable options.<sup>22</sup>

## Eliminating Parking Minimums and Supporting Policies

Eliminating parking minimums is a critical and necessary step toward building more affordable, sustainable, and livable communities in the North Bay.

### CASE STUDY:

#### Berkeley Parking Reform

In 2021, Berkeley enacted major parking reforms reflecting the city's long-term commitment to sustainability and housing affordability, addressing long-standing issues associated with parking mandates.

##### October 2019

- A city-conducted parking utilization study revealed significant inefficiencies in parking use. The study focused on multi-unit residential buildings with 10 or more units and found that only 54% of off-street parking spaces were occupied. The findings also showed that just 60% of on-street parking near these buildings was being used. This data highlighted that the city's parking supply far exceeded demand, prompting city officials to reconsider their parking policies.

##### January 2021

- In response to these findings, the Berkeley City Council voted to eliminate minimum parking requirements for new housing developments. This reform allowed developers to focus on creating more housing units instead of dedicating valuable space to underutilized parking spots.
- Alongside eliminating minimums, the City Council introduced parking maximums for new developments in transit-friendly areas. In these zones, off-street parking was limited to 0.5 spaces per unit for projects within a quarter-mile of a high-quality transit corridor.

##### January 2021

- To further support these efforts and reduce car dependency, Berkeley implemented a set of Transportation Demand Management (TDM) measures for developments with 10 or more units. These measures included:
  - **Bicycle Parking:** Developers were required to provide ample bicycle parking per the city's 2017 Bicycle Plan.
  - **Transit Incentives:** Developers were mandated to offer residents free transit passes or Clipper Card credits for 10 years, encouraging greater use of public transportation.
  - **Unbundling Parking from Rent:** Developers were required to unbundle parking costs from rent.

### Flexibility

The key benefit of eliminating parking minimums is flexibility—allowing developments to align parking supply with actual demand, rather than imposing one-size-fits-all requirements.

Cities like Berkeley, which have removed parking minimums near transit, have seen increased housing affordability and a reduction in car dependency. This reform has been pivotal in creating more walkable, transit-friendly communities, showing that when developers are given the flexibility to design projects that meet modern needs, the results benefit both the community and the environment.<sup>23</sup>

### Parking Maximums

However, ensuring the success of removing parking minimums sometimes requires the implementation of additional supportive policies. One such policy, the establishment of parking maximums, helps developments meet density goals without unnecessary, excessive parking. By capping the number of parking spaces allowed, cities can encourage more efficient land use while allowing for denser, transit-oriented development. Parking maximums promote alternatives like biking, walking, and public transit, all of which support the creation of compact, people-centered neighborhoods that align with sustainability and housing goals.<sup>24</sup>

### Unbundled Parking

Another important strategy is unbundling parking from housing costs. By separating the cost of parking from the cost of housing units, residents who do not need parking will not be forced to pay for it, lowering their overall housing costs. Portland's successful unbundling policy has resulted in decreased car ownership and greater use of public transit, helping residents save on housing while reducing the need for parking spaces.<sup>25</sup> This approach provides flexibility for developers and ensures that parking is allocated based on actual demand, not assumptions.

### Shared Parking

Encouraging shared parking is another way cities can maximize the efficiency of existing parking infrastructure. Shared parking arrangements between commercial and residential developments with complementary peak usage times can reduce the total amount of parking needed. For instance, spaces used by businesses during the day can be shared with nearby residential buildings that need parking primarily at night. This strategy reduces the overall need for new parking facilities and allows for better use of existing land, freeing up space for housing, green spaces, or other community benefits. By making more efficient use of current parking resources, shared parking further supports the elimination of minimums while addressing concerns about parking availability.<sup>26</sup>

## Transportation Demand Management

In addition to these strategies, cities can implement Transportation Demand Management (TDM) programs that offer incentives for alternative transportation. Subsidized transit passes, enhanced bike facilities, and car-sharing programs all encourage residents to rely less on cars, directly reducing the need for parking.<sup>27</sup> San Francisco's TDM program has shown how effective these measures are in reducing vehicle trips and supporting more sustainable urban development.<sup>28</sup> By encouraging sustainable transportation options, TDM programs complement the removal of parking minimums and help manage parking demand during the transition.

## Parking Benefit Districts

To ensure that any remaining parking demand is managed responsibly, cities should also consider establishing Parking Benefit Districts (PBDs). PBDs reinvest revenue from parking fees back into the local community, funding infrastructure improvements, public transportation enhancements, and pedestrian amenities.<sup>29</sup> This approach ensures that as parking policies evolve, the community directly benefits from parking revenue, while reducing the need for expansive parking lots.

## Residential Parking Permit Programs

Additionally, Residential Parking Permit (RPP) programs can help manage on-street parking in residential neighborhoods. These programs ensure that residents retain priority for parking, preventing spillover from nearby commercial developments and reducing concerns about parking shortages.<sup>30</sup> RPPs can be tailored to meet the needs of specific neighborhoods, providing a flexible tool for managing parking during the transition away from minimums.

## Existing Legislation

Finally, cities can leverage state legislation like AB 1401, which prohibits parking minimums for residential and commercial developments near transit. This state-led initiative supports local efforts to eliminate parking minimums, making it easier for cities to promote housing affordability and sustainable development in areas where residents have greater access to public transportation. AB 1401 provides a legal framework that aligns with the broader goals of reducing car dependency and increasing housing density near transit hubs.

Together, these reforms create a comprehensive approach to addressing the challenges posed by outdated parking policies. By eliminating parking minimums and supporting the transition with policies like parking maximums, unbundled parking, and shared parking, cities can reduce car dependency, lower housing costs, and promote more efficient use of land.

## Importance of Transit in Parking Reform

Efficient public transportation is a critical component of reducing personal vehicle use and parking demand, but it's only part of the solution. Alternative transportation options like biking, walking, and rideshare services also play a vital role in decreasing car dependency. However, Sonoma County's transportation network faces challenges, with residents often underserved by infrequent public transit and limited weekend service.

Efforts to enhance both public and alternative transportation are underway at regional and county levels. The Integrated Transit Service Plan (2024) seeks to enhance transit efficiency, while the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) promotes Transit-Oriented Communities (TOC) by increasing housing density near transit hubs, enhancing biking and walking infrastructure, and supporting rideshare services. These initiatives reduce reliance on personal vehicles and create more livable, walkable neighborhoods.

Plan Bay Area 2050 offers a comprehensive vision for a connected transportation network that includes expanding public transit frequency, developing the regional rail system, and implementing complete streets to support biking and walking. At the city level, the Santa Rosa General Plan 2050 emphasizes improving public transportation alongside alternative transportation options, such as bike lanes and pedestrian pathways, to meet the community's needs. Petaluma's fare-free bus program, which resulted in a 59% increase in ridership, highlights the significant impact that better public transportation access can have on reducing car use.

In addition, rideshare services like Uber offer a flexible alternative to personal car ownership, further reducing the demand for parking spaces.<sup>31</sup> By improving both public and alternative transportation infrastructure—including walking, biking, and rideshare options—Sonoma County can substantially reduce parking demand, making the case for eliminating parking minimums and fostering more sustainable, affordable communities.

## Conclusion

To unlock more affordable, sustainable, and vibrant communities, eliminating parking minimums is a critical and urgent step for the North Bay. Now is the time to act—by removing outdated mandates, we can immediately reduce housing costs, free up valuable land, and enable the creation of walkable, transit-friendly neighborhoods. Successes in cities like Seattle and Minneapolis show that this reform leads to

significant increases in housing production and diversity—we cannot wait to embrace these proven solutions. As Sonoma County faces growing housing and environmental pressures, adopting flexible parking policies is essential to meeting these challenges head-on and building a more resilient, equitable future for all.

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