



Residential Parking Regulation in San Francisco: The Unintended Consequences of Residential Parking Minimums

By: Zach Kerwin

“For a concert hall, Los Angeles requires, at a minimum, 50 times more parking spaces than San Francisco allows as the maximum. This difference in planning helps explain why downtown San Francisco is much more exciting and livable than downtown Los Angeles.” - Donald C. Shoup

Introduction

Lurking just beneath the surface of many policy discussions in San Francisco, such as ones on new housing developments around the neighborhoods of Upper Market Street or the addition of a Bus Rapid Transit system on Geary Boulevard, is the issue of parking. From the 1950's to near present, San Francisco zoned a 1:1 parking to unit minimum for residential development, unlike the existing housing stock. The City's enactment of this parking regulation followed a nationwide shift to auto dependency after WWII, based on the tacit assumption that virtually every household included a driver or soon would. The transportation paradigm of the mid 20th century was built upon public transit being viewed as outmoded. . Thus, this regulation was part of a set of beliefs, now being challenged, that more off-street parking would decrease traffic congestion, reduce pollution and ultimately make the city more competitive with the suburbs. Today, many experts successfully argue that these requirements have actually increased congestion, decreased the stock of affordable housing, spread development away from transit, and reduced density, which restricts overall housing supply. In recent years, San Francisco has begun to implement more progressive parking policies that have legislated parking maximums, rather than minimums in transit rich areas.

Though planning in San Francisco has typically followed the same path as most other cities and suburbs by imposing parking minimums in residential areas, planners did embrace a transit first approach when creating the High Rise Financial District we see today. According to SPUR, “From 1965 to 1983, in fact, 30 million square feet of office space were added to the downtown while vehicular traffic decreased by 3.7%”. Today only a third of the trips workers make downtown are made by private car and of those a third involves carpooling (SPUR, 2005). The vision of the Bart system was to allow suburban commuters access to jobs in a rapidly densifying downtown San Francisco with limited and expensive parking. Now 40 years later, the idea of transit first is starting to be applied to the array of other transit rich neighborhoods in San Francisco and in nearby cities.

Zoning and regulation of development

Zoning is the set of regulations that govern land use as part of the police power that governments exercise over private property. Most often Euclidian Zoning is used to separate uses that are incompatible and often has the secondary effect of protecting existing residents. This practice stems from the Supreme Court's first major decision, from the Euclid v. Ambler Realty case, to uphold a jurisdiction's

right to zone land use (Callies, 1998). In the Euclid case, the Supreme Court upheld a zoning law, which excluded businesses from residential districts. This exercise of police power was upheld on the grounds that the exclusion rationally related to community health and safety, and thus, did not violate the Due Process clause of the 14th Amendment to the US constitution.

As zoning evolved, parking, along with most other aspects of development, were subject to regulation. Off street parking requirements were implemented with the argument that they would reduce or avoid congestion, reduce pollution and manage scarce street parking in residential neighborhoods. Starting in the 1940s, U.S. cities began to require residential and commercial parking in new developments.

Beyond San Francisco, courts have made it clear that local jurisdictions have the right to regulate off street parking as they see fit as an exercise of their police power. Parking requirements have specifically held up to constitutional challenges by landowners and developers in cases such as *City of Aspen V. Stroud* (Lewyn, 2006). In this case, the Colorado Supreme Court rejected a Takings Clause challenge to a city's minimum parking requirements with the justification that the ordinance was a legitimate exercise of police power because it would reduce air pollution by having residents drive around less to look for parking. Still, though parking maximums have not been challenged in the courts specifically, they appear to not infringe upon the rights of a given community, in or outside of San Francisco, to the extent that they do not contradict rights guaranteed under the Constitution.

The impact of parking neighborhood use

Residential parking required in post WWII developments fundamentally changed the look of many neighborhoods in San Francisco. Mixed use and compact walkable areas that once had continuous store fronts were increasingly filled in with businesses that included parking lots for the new drivers and residential buildings that included curb cuts to accommodate the first floor designated for parking. This had the effect of making the neighborhoods less accessible and attractive to pedestrians.

A large number of curb cuts and private parking lots decrease on-street parking, reduce pedestrian safety, and generally take up space that degrades retail and slows public transit. Also, some requirements, which in part stem from environmental concerns of congestion, have produced indirect costs, including the encouragement of driving, decreased transit use, lowered urban densities and exacerbated sprawl (Litman, 1995). Such effects, characteristic of the mid to latter part of the 20th Century, degrade the aesthetics and function of urban neighborhoods in San Francisco. This line of thought dictated that those neighborhoods built out after WWII, such as



Car centric development on Mission Street

(Source: Zack Kerwin, 2006)

much of the west side of the city, have lower densities with more accommodation for autos.

The impact of parking on housing affordability

The allocation of space and resources for providing parking has a direct impact on the cost of housing. Inclusion of a minimum number of parking spaces in residential developments requires not only land but also construction materials and increased labor, thereby increasing the cost of development. The increased need for land to provide parking takes place in the early stages of the development process and, thus, adds to the initial finance costs. The high cost of parking is felt beyond the acquisition of land and funds stage. A 1996 study of San Francisco housing uncovered that, on average, single family houses were 11.8% more costly when off street parking was included while condos were 13.8% more costly. In addition, it was shown that only the size of the unit and the number of bathrooms had a larger effect on the sales price than did off-street parking (Jia, 1998). In a national study conducted in a number of markets, it was shown that one parking space, on average, increased a unit price by 12.5% and two spaces by 25% (Litman, 1995). According to the SF Planning department, in dense urban areas high rise buildings that include parking can add up to \$50,000 per unit (SF Planning Dept, 2006).

Considering the price differential in the San Francisco study, the authors concluded that at the time (1996) an additional 16,600 households could afford a single family home without parking requirements and 26,800 could afford a similar condominium. This would amount to a 20% increase in the number of households that could afford to buy (Jia, 1998). Even with considering the high price of



Mixed use development on Mission Street

(Photo Zack Kerwin 2006)

land in San Francisco and the relatively smaller size of units, parking still comprises a disproportionately large percentage of the total costs for potential homebuyers. According to the SF planning department, “If we build just one parking space for every one dwelling unit needed by 2020, we will need 130 acres of land just for parking. If the parking is on-site we will have to build higher” (SF Planning Dept, 2006). One study estimates that across all types of development (including commercial) parking constitutes a 10% tax on citizens (Litman, 1995). This “tax” is exceedingly regressive for low-income people who are less likely to own a car.

Traffic congestion and public transit

As a rule, in all but the densest of downtown areas parking is assumed to be available and usually free. In San Francisco, as in most places, it can be assumed that people who have at-home parking and hold the expectation that their destination will have parking are more likely to own and regularly drive a car. In a study conducted by Todd Littman it was found that car demand is elastic. A 10% increase in the cost of car ownership reduces it by 4-10%. Up-

wards of 30% of households in San Francisco do not own a car and this often correlates with the age, density, and availability of parking characteristic of a neighborhood. The percentage of car-free households in transit-rich areas exceeds 50%, including up to 70% car-less in the Mid-Market and Tenderloin neighborhoods.

Traffic congestion degrades public transit service. The streets of San Francisco are approaching capacity and, consequently, this phenomenon directly slows public transit. Ineffective transit is a vicious circle; unreliable transit results in fewer riders who may then decide to drive, thereby increasing congestion. By the year 2030 it is projected that an additional half million trips will be made to and within the city of San Francisco each day, constituting a 12% increase (SFCTA, 2006). According to SPUR research, adding an average of just one minute of delay to Muni trips along Mission Street increases costs by \$43,000 per year. In addition, at this pace, 70 percent of downtown intersections analyzed are projected to perform at a failing rate (level F is defined as delays of greater than 60 seconds) by 2020. Thus, it is clear that San Francisco cannot simply continue to add parking and residents without greatly affecting the quality of life in San Francisco (SPUR, 2006).

Housing density and decentralization

In a city like San Francisco, the required inclusion of parking induces decentralization and regional sprawl. Littman found that when a substantial amount of space is allotted to car parking, housing densities decrease pushing development outward and exacerbating sprawl. One off street parking spot

requires 300 feet of service area. If the requirement for parking were for 2:1 for an 1100 square foot apartment it would result in a 37% increase in needed land per unit (Litman, 1995). In very small units such as

“If North Beach were built today, with parking requirements, up to a third of the the space that people live in would be used for parking.”

we have in San Francisco it is possible that up to a third of the land could be needed for the parking for the unit. Assuming a constant zoned height limit

in San Francisco neighborhoods it is easy to see that the increased land needed for parking decreases the maximum housing density at the building, neighborhood and city level. If North Beach were built today, with parking requirements, up to a third of the the space that people live in would be used for parking (SF Planning Dept, 2006).

Transit first planning in San Francisco

As part of the Citywide Action Plan (CAP) and the Better Neighborhoods Program the San Francisco Planning Department is rezoning some areas in close proximity to transit with parking maximums and revisions to density allowances. Though the City adopted a “Transit First” policy in 1973, the issue of parking has been addressed only recently in those areas where it makes sense to build upon the model of older successful neighborhoods such as North Beach and Nob Hill

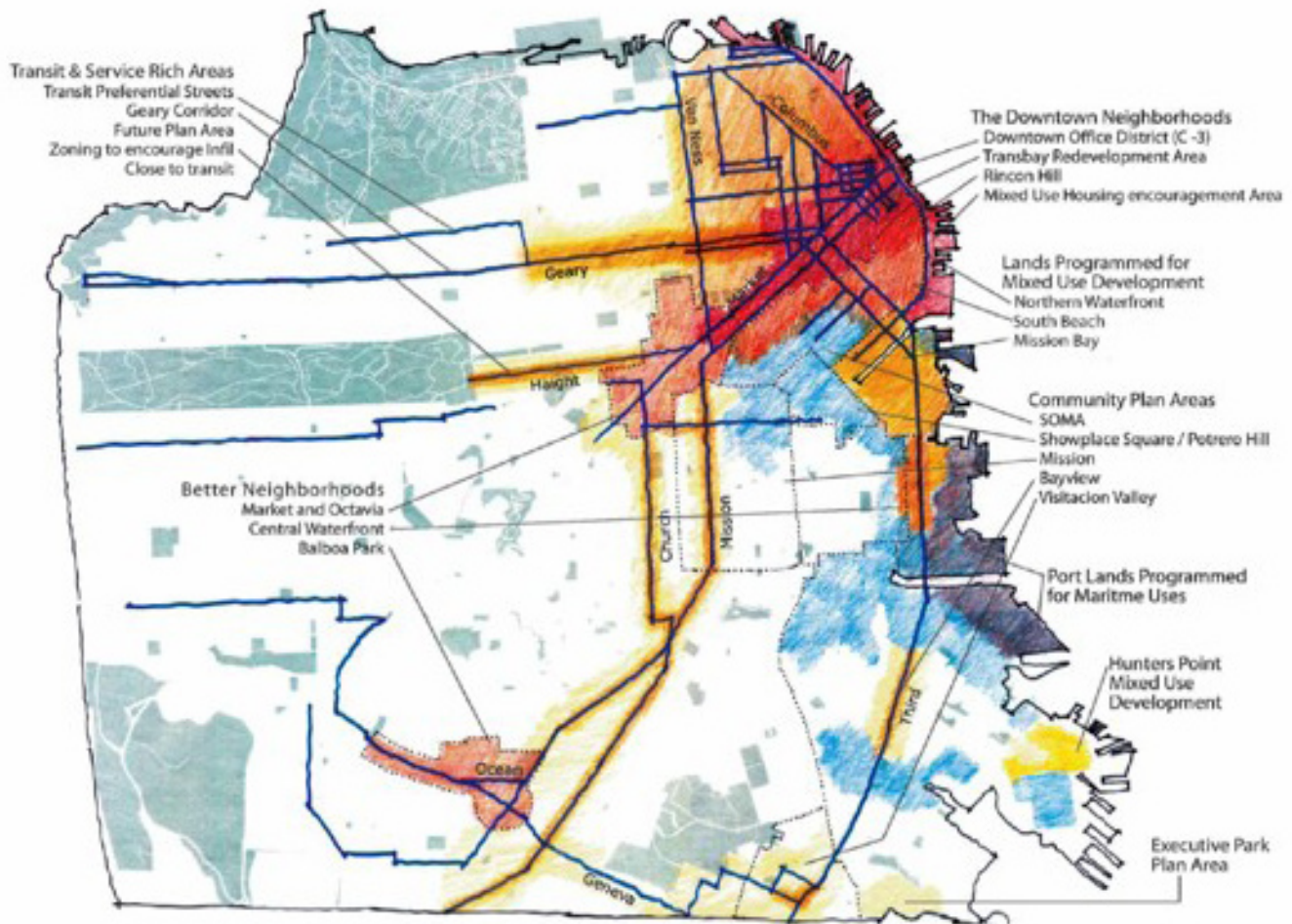
Legislation passed in the summer of 2006 eliminated minimum parking requirements for housing in the downtown commercial (C-3) zoning districts. Once in full practice it will enforce maximums of three spaces for every four units while allowing developers to use valet and stacked mechanical parking when possible to effectively manage space. The new legislation also requires below-

ground parking and ground level public frontages for good urban design. Another important aspect is that in developments with more than 10 units parking will be debundled from the cost of the unit. This will allow a separate market for the purchase of off street parking. With this new and progressive legislation, people who do not own cars can save up to 50 thousand dollars on the price of their condos. Other requirements such as mandated bicycle parking and spots reserved for car sharing programs will also make car-free living easier and more enticing (Livable City, 2006). Furthermore, these changes will impact upwards of 20 thousand potential units

in the areas adjacent to downtown and create high-rise, high-density neighborhoods.

The Planning Department, as part of the Better Neighborhoods initiative, and the CAP are proposing parking maximums and new policies in transit corridors as well. An example is the draft proposal for the Octavia & Market plan where a large public investment in the new Octavia Boulevard was made. The draft plan calls for .5:1 parking rations in neighborhood commercial areas and .75:1 residential maximums. Other ideas include elimination of curb cuts on transit-preferred streets, encouragement of off street parking, accessible by side streets or alleys,

Citywide Action Plan Map proposing potential opportunities for zoning changes to decrease parking and improve transit (San Francisco Planning Department)



and increased allowable densities to improve mass transit. Eventually this new zoning may be implemented in other San Francisco neighborhoods.

Conclusions

Though the reduction of parking to improve the City may seem counter-intuitive to some, the tradeoffs and unintended consequences of abundant parking are persuasive when considered as a whole. The decrease in housing affordability, ineffective urban design, reduced density, sprawl, weakened public transit, and increased congestion is all clearly detrimental to the built and natural environment. Decoupling parking and housing allows a market for both so that the true cost of each can be determined by demand. The implementation of this policy, along with new parking maximums, encourages and supports public transit and makes housing more affordable and diverse. Smart land-use maximizes the public's investments in new transit infrastructure and improves the environment for pedestrians.

Though the implementation of new policies and zoning is not always simple, as evidenced by the protracted planning process for the Octavia and Market plan, it is vital to get legislation passed in applicable neighborhoods that need to be relieved of congestion to both act as a successful model for the future and for an overall improvement in the quality of life. It will take education and a gradual change in attitudes before a shift can occur in peoples thinking. For the betterment and support of neighborhoods and public transit, the new paradigm must be that parking is a commodity rather than an entitlement. §

Zack Kerwin is a former Urban Studies student at San Francisco State. He is interested in urban planning and policy and loves to travel - especially to Tokyo, which he believes is the most fascinating urban environment in the world. He is currently applying to graduate school for City and Regional Planning. He would like to thank Professor LeGates for his support and encouragement. This paper originated from Professor LeGates' Politics, Law, and the Environment class.

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