

NRC Rationale for Elimination from City Code of Mandated/Legislated Numbers of Parking Spaces

Best use of limited land

The City of La Crosse is obligated to make the highest and best use of the limited land between the river and the bluffs. While we know that many people have concerns about the availability of parking, automatic or pre-determined parking requirements in the municipal code, regardless of the actual need, unnecessarily constrain housing and economic development, and therefore directly limits the city tax base. Removing these constraints creates the opportunity to build more capitably efficient buildings such as additional dwellings, businesses, or service providers.¹ The true costs of parking are often hidden because of the indirect ways that most of us pay for them such as lower wages, higher taxes, and prices of goods, services or rent. For instance, the cost of parking makes up about 17-20 percent of a housing unit's rent.² More parking for cars means fewer places for people.

Choice to provide parking still remains

This ordinance does not eliminate existing parking nor does it prevent new parking. Instead, it removes specific numbers of mandated requirements put into place a decade ago. It gives landowners and neighborhoods the flexibility to make their own determinations for parking spaces rather than forcing investors, developers or lenders to choose between scaling down or abandoning a project, spending more, or taking the time to seek variances. Other more appropriate or sensitive market factors will be able to determine parking needs such as bank loan conditions, anticipated user demand, fuel and energy prices, declining car ownership, or growth of ride-share services.

Flexibility for the future

We can't change the past, but we don't want to be bound by policies that no longer serve the interests of the city. Minimum parking requirements came into widespread use in the 1970s and we now see how this outdated policy holds cities back rather than allowing growth.³ The old requirements were top-down decisions that replaced independent decisions by residents, neighborhoods, developers, lenders, and buyers. This new ordinance aligns with the goals of the city's many plans for the future including the Strategic Plan for Sustainability, Comprehensive Plan, Transportation Vision Memo, Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan, Multi-Family Housing Design Standards, Commercial Design Standards, and Overlay Districts. COVID has also shown that behaviors can change and that we need to examine our assumptions about the necessities of individual car use.

¹ Research Institute for Housing America, "Quantified Parking: Comprehensive Parking Inventories for Five US Cities," May 2018.

² C.J. Gabbe and Gregory Pierce, "Hidden Costs and Deadweight Losses: Bundled Parking and Residential Rents in the Metropolitan United States," *Housing Policy Debate*, 2017; Todd Litman, "Socially Optimal Transport Prices and Markets," Victoria Transport Policy Institute, October 2020.

³ Erik Ferguson, "Zoning for Parking as Policy Process: A Historical Review," *Transport Reviews* 24.2 (2004): 177-194

Part of a trend in policy

By removing required parking minimums, La Crosse is part of a state-wide and national trend. Currently in downtown La Crosse, off-street parking requirements are already waived for private development. In Wisconsin and nearby, Ashland, Winona, Stevens Point, and Fitchburg have partially or entirely eliminated parking minimums in the last 5 years.⁴ Since 2016, Minneapolis, Hartford, CT, Buffalo, NY, San Francisco, Portland, OR and also mid-sized cities like South Bend, Indiana have eliminated all required off-street parking spaces.⁵

No shortage of parking, transportation preferences are changing

While we can't change the restrictions that developers or landlords had to meet in the past, we can do better in the future. The future points to a decline in car culture as a life-style preference for both young and old. We have no evidence of inadequate parking in La Crosse but plenty of evidence of excess parking availability and increasing preferences for multimodal lifestyles. Over 160,000 Wisconsin households do not have a personal car.⁶ Ownership of a car is prohibitively expensive for many families with low incomes. Many young adults from Wisconsin say they prefer to live in areas with good public transportation and a growing number of people are forgoing car ownership.⁷ Nationwide, the number of 16-year-olds holding a driver's license has fallen from 43 percent in 1987 to just 26 percent in 2017.⁸ The timing of this new ordinance reflects the downward trend in the desirability of cars among millennials and the projected aging of the regional population.⁹

The final report of the “*Downtown Parking Study Update & Analysis of Expanded Areas*” completed by Rich & Associates Parking Consultants in July 2020 shows that, on a “typical” weekday, no place under study ever reached parking occupancy capacity, even at peak demand. The four areas studied, the densest in the city, had ample parking at all times. We have no evidence of parking shortages in the evenings or at night.

⁴ “More Cities Than Ever are Eliminating Parking Minimums,” Strong Towns, November 23, 2018. <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2018/11/23/a-map-of-cities-that-got-rid-of-parking-minimums-updated?rq=parking%20minimums>

⁵ “San Francisco Eliminates Parking Minimums,” *Streetsblog* USA, 17 December 2018; “In South Bend, Pete Buttigieg challenged a decades-old assumption that streets are for cars above all else,” *Washington Post*, 16 January 2021.

⁶ “U.S. Census Bureau, 2014-2018 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates - Table DP04.” Data.census.gov, United States Census Bureau, data.census.gov/cedsci/table?g=0400000US55; “Blueprint 2050: A 21st Century Transportation System for Wisconsin,” 1000 Friends of Wisconsin, December 8, 2020, p.15

⁷ Fisher, Emma, and Peter Skopec. “Millennials on the Move: A Survey of Changing Transportation Trends and How They Can Help Wisconsin Thrive.” WISPIRG, Feb. 2019, <https://wispirg.org/reports/wip/millennials-move>

⁸ Kane, Joseph. “Banning Cars Won’t Solve America’s Bigger Transportation Problem: Long Trips.” Brookings Institute, 6 Jan. 2020, [www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2020/01/06/banning-cars-wont-solve-americas-bigger-transportation-problem-long-trips/?utm_campaign=Brookings Brief](http://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2020/01/06/banning-cars-wont-solve-americas-bigger-transportation-problem-long-trips/?utm_campaign=Brookings%20Brief).

⁹ La Crosse County *ECONOWATCH*, Fall 2019. https://lacrosse.extension.wisc.edu/files/2019/08/Econowatch-Fall-2019-August_2_2019.pdf

