STRONG TOWNS

WE FORBID WHAT WE VALUE MOST.

NOVEMBER 21, 2017
BY BENJAMIN LEDFORD

This Friday is our annual #BlackFridayParking event — a nationwide action drawing attention to the harmful nature of minimum parking requirements. Each year on Black Friday, one of the biggest shopping days of the year, people across North America are invited to snap photos of the (hardly full) parking lots in their communities to demonstrate how unnecessary these massive lots are. Participants then upload those photos to social media with the hashtag #blackfridayparking. Get more info about how to participate here.

The following guest article demonstrates exactly why parking minimums are such a huge problem, using an example from Pocatello, Idaho that should prove relevant for towns across the country.

Old Town is probably Pocatello, Idaho's most cherished neighborhood. It has its own challenges and it's not the most affluent area of the city. But still, this older neighborhood of historic houses and storefronts squeezed between the railroad and the river is where we come to have our portraits taken. It's where we have our parade of lights at Christmas and hang flower baskets in the spring. We put pictures of it in our promotional materials and our comprehensive plan.

Old Town Pocatello, ID (Source: Roadside pictures)

Old Town at night (Source: Craig Worth)

We value Old Town so much that we actually protect it with a historic district designation so that it won't be lost.

If we valued the way this part of the city was built so much, you'd think we would want people to build more neighborhoods like it. And maybe we do. But our laws make that impossible.

Like most cities in America, Pocatello's city code sets minimum parking requirements for all types of new development, and the reality is that these parking minimums forbid anyone from ever building a neighborhood that looks remotely like Old Town anywhere in Pocatello.

Take a look at the numbers. Office and retail uses require 1 parking space for every 250 square feet (SF) of floor area. When you include the driving lanes, landscaping, etc., each parking space requires at least 300 SF of parking lot (with a very efficient layout). That means, according to the code, your parking lot is required to be larger than your building. For restaurants, bars, and medical offices, a parking space is required for every 200 SF of floor area, meaning the parking lot must be at least 150% the size of the building. Similarly, apartments require 2 spaces per unit, and considering that a lot of the older apartments are less than 600 SF, they would require more parking lot than building space as well.

This is all assuming single-story buildings. If you want to build two stories, of course, the parking lot has to double, and so on for each additional story beyond that. It should be clear from these ratios that we could never allow a full block of side-by-side single story storefront shops along a

sidewalk. The block would have to be at least half parking lots, probably more. A block of two story buildings is even farther from the realm of possibility.

Let's assume some well-intentioned developer wants to create a pleasant, walkable neighborhood of shops and offices for the benefit of Pocatello residents in some other part of the city. Let's say just one street. Here is one block of Main Street.

The blocks are 300 feet long and the buildings average about 2 stories. Let's say, based on the code, that the ratio of building floor area to parking lot is 1:1.2. In order to build this one section of street, this is the amount of parking that would be required.

You could do it, but it's hardly a neighborhood; it's just a bit of strip development. And it can't be connected to a neighborhood because of its buffer area of required parking. You could build a few clusters of these separated by their parking lots, which is essentially the typical auto-oriented development we have along the highways. Or you could combine more of them into a larger conglomeration surrounded by an even larger parking lot, which is essentially a mall. What you can't build is an actual downtown.

In fact, you can't even build Old Town in Old Town! The parking minimums apply there, too. Now, there is an exception for existing buildings in the historic district, but not for new construction. It reads as follows:

> *Because of the special physical constraints in the central commercial zoning district, off street parking requirements in this district need not be met for any permitted use which occupies or will occupy an existing building. All off street parking requirements shall be met for uses involving new construction or expansion of existing structures.* — Pocatello City Code, section 17.05.520

This means that Old Town can never grow and expand in the same pattern that we love so much, and that we can never infill the empty paved lots where buildings have been lost. In order to build a two-story downtown infill building, you would have to tear down an equally sized building on each side to build your parking.

Here's an example of best practices for a new building in Old Town. In 1993, First Security Bank (now Wells Fargo) built a new building on Main Street at the south end of Old Town. They made every effort to reflect and contribute to the character of the neighborhood. It's two stories, built up

to the corner, has an entrance on the sidewalk, and is clad in brick with some historically inspired detailing.

Wells Fargo at Main and Bonneville

But in order to create the downtown character on one corner, two other corners had to become permanent parking lots, which cover more than twice the area of the building itself. In fact, now this largely empty parking lot essentially marks where the active portion of Main Street stops.
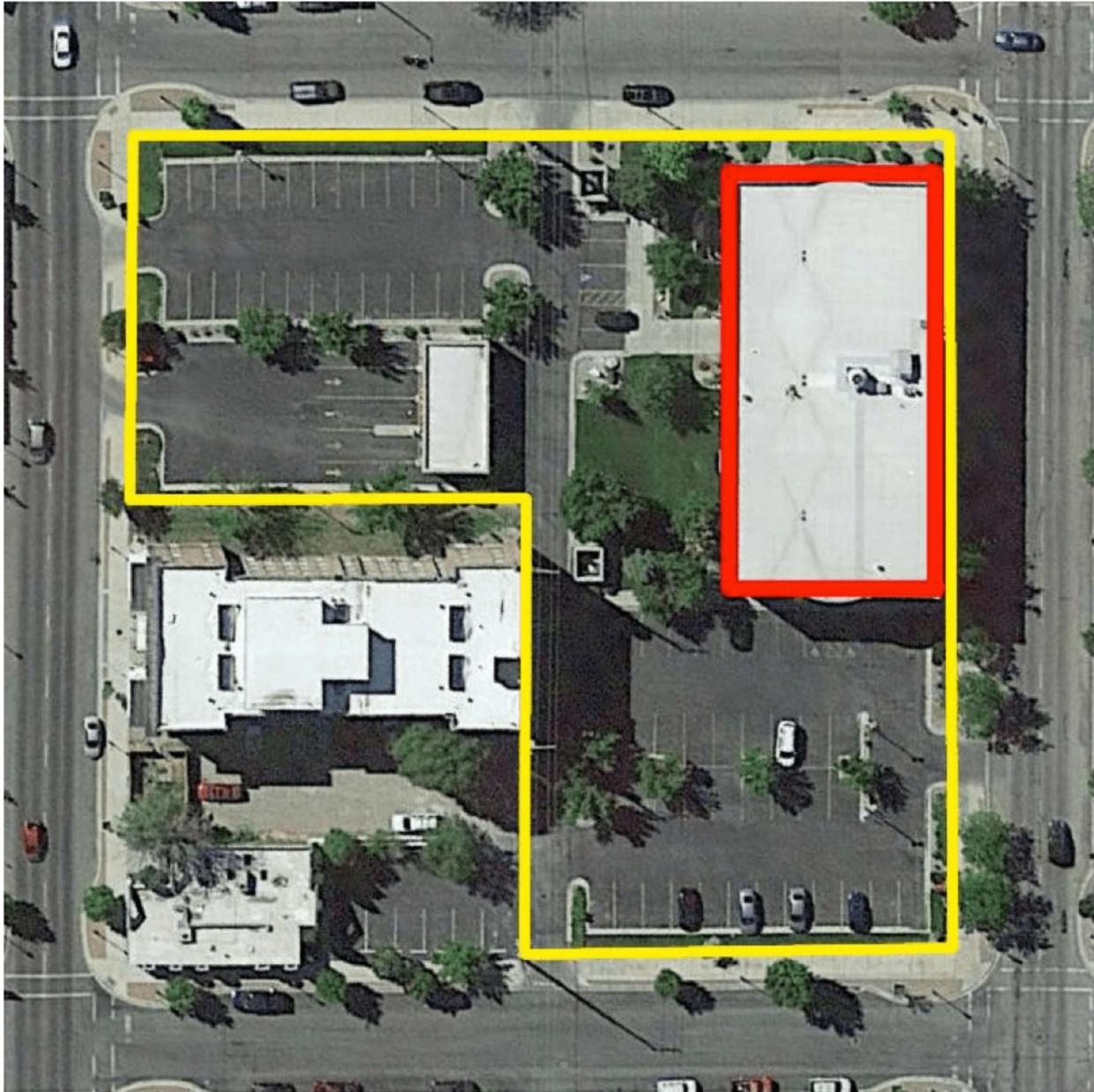

The parking lot necessary to support the modest Wells Fargo building above...

....yet more parking.

Here's what the whole site looks like:

Google aerial showing Wells Fargo building (red) and total site area (yellow)

Infill isn't possible, either. In the first place, most of the empty lots have been turned into parking lots for the adjacent buildings. Can they be rebuilt to what they once were?

> *Land areas actually being used for off street parking in connection with any building or use may not be reduced in capacity to fewer parking spaces than required by this chapter without an exception approved by the city council.* — Pocatello City Code, section 17.05.530

In short, no. Once it's become parking, it has to stay parking. The downtown building stock can only be eroded, not replenished.

But let's assume we were allowed to build on some of those empty lots. What would be required? Pocatello used to have a beautiful 4-story YMCA building that tragically burned down and is now a half-empty parking lot for the adjacent building.

Pocatello's former YMCA (Source: Margaret Facer)

Here is an aerial of the location where it once stood, along with another showing the amount of parking that would be required if we were rebuild it today. Essentially, we would have to wipe out the remaining half of the block.
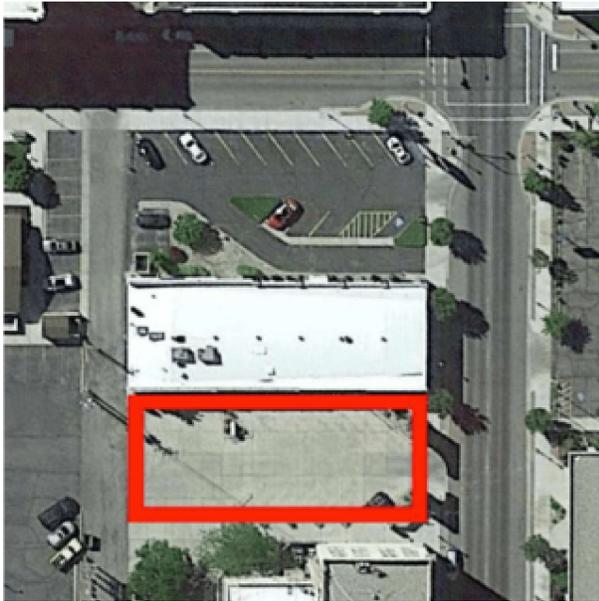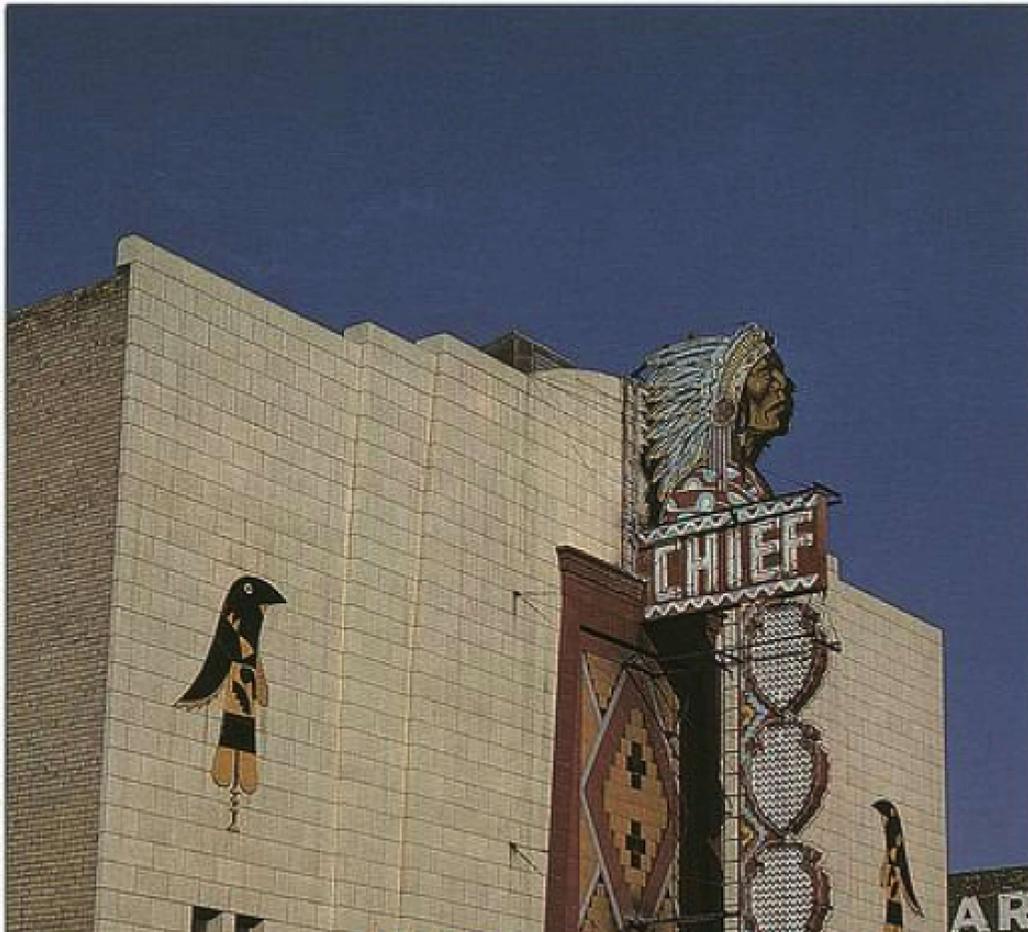
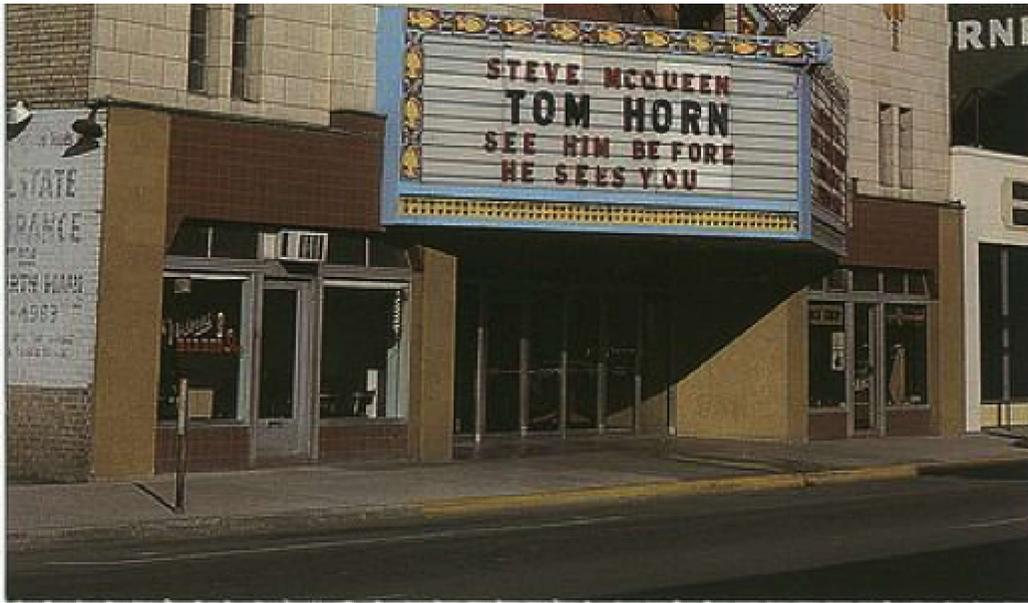Location of the former YMCA

How much parking we'd need to provide for it

So are we to believe that we're better off with the few stalls of parking there currently than we would be to have the old building back?

An even greater tragedy was the Chief Theater on Main Street.

Source: Cinema Treasures

In the 1980's an iconic theater was painstakingly restored and reopened through great community effort, only to be lost to a fire in 1993. No one would deny it was a treasure, and its loss was a hard hit to Old Town. So could we rebuild it? Here is the site of the Chief Theater:

The parking requirement for theaters is one space for every 4 seats. The Chief had 1,200 seats and zero off-street parking spaces. To rebuild it, the code would require 300 parking spaces, or an entire 300'x300' downtown block. In other words, in order to rebuild it and meet code, you would have to level the rest of the block and then some for parking. It would look something like this:

Of course, you couldn't do that because the other buildings on the block are protected as part of the historic district as well, and rightly so. So you couldn't legally rebuild it at all.

That's not to say that the city wouldn't be willing to make an exception in this case. Our city staff are excellent. They see the value in infill, they want to help, and they want to make these sort of projects work, but they have to fight their own code to do it.

Why do we have a code that requires exceptions in order to build the neighborhoods we like the best? Why does it, by default, forbid the very building types that we are trying to preserve and protect?

The stated purpose of the parking requirements is "to provide adequate parking so as not to negatively impact adjoining properties." (Pocatello City Code, section 17.05.510, emphasis added). By that reasoning, the Chief Theater, with its zero off-street parking spaces, was negatively

impacting adjacent properties. Of course, everyone knows that's not true (just ask the owners of the restaurants, hair salons, bars and and retail stores in the adjacent properties if having a 1,200 seat theater next door would negatively impact them), but that is the reasoning with which the code is written.

These parking requirements make no sense, and they're preventing the growth of beautiful, walkable and economically productive developments. It's time to get rid of them so that we can start building strong towns.

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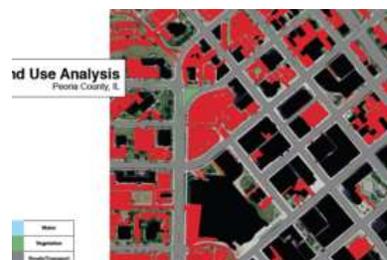Plus 5 tips for repealing parking minimums in *your* community.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Benjamin Ledford is an architect and landlord in Pocatello, ID. He, his wife and their 3 daughters live in the attic of a 100-year-old home, and it's quite charming.

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Posted in Parking, Member Post *and tagged with* downtown, traditional development pattern

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Chris_Kez • 3 months ago
@Benjamin Ledford What about multi-story parking or underground parking? Or redeveloping a large city block so that the outer ring is multi-story buildings surrounding a largely invisible garage in the middle? You just have a small storefront sized garage entry on two sides.

1 ∧ | ∨ • Share ›

> **Benjamin Ledford** ➜ Chris_Kez • 3 months ago
> Parking garages usually get mentioned, but I'm afraid that in most places they don't make sense. Right off the batt, they cut out small-scale development, because they're out of reach for small-scale developers and because it's not economical to build structured or underground parking just to stack four spaces on top of another four spaces - the scale doesn't work.
>
> Secondly, structured parking takes up a lot of space (even if you hide it) and in an existing neighborhood those large lots aren't typically availble without tearing down other structures.
>
> Finally, and most importantly, in Pocatello (and many many cities like it) the real estate market will not support structured parking. It's too expensive and you cannot command the rents or sales prices that would be required to pay for it. In Pocatello, prices are so low that they barely support new construction at all - in many cases they barely support the cost of maintenance and renovation. At $20,000- $30,000/space, structured parking is a fantasy here.
>
> ∧ | ∨ • Share ›

> > **Chris_Kez** ➜ Benjamin Ledford • 3 months ago
> > Yeah, that makes total sense. I was just thinking about an ongoing project near me in South Norwalk, CT that has essentially hidden away a large multi-story parking deck (in solid red) and I believe some lower-level parking (in dotted red) to support a bunch of new development (in blue). The back of the garage faces the Amtrak and Metro North train tracks. All parking is accessed by cut-through's on

Metro North train tracks. All parking is accessed by cut-through's on
two streets, with apartments overhead. But this is definitely an area
that can support high rents.
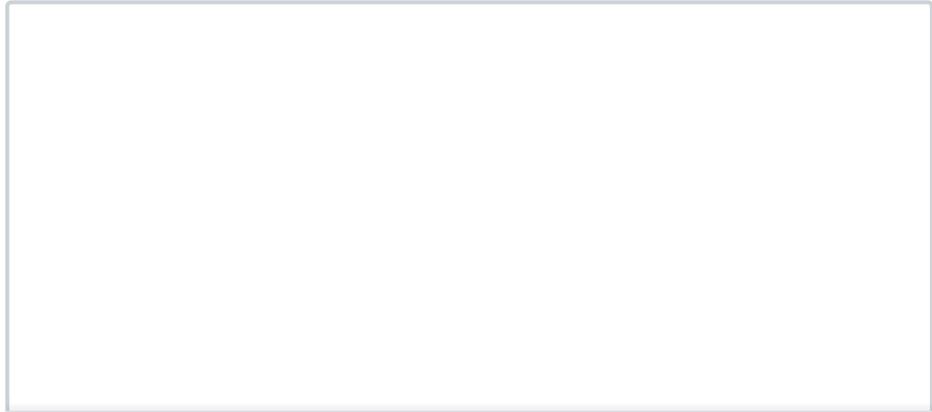
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Chris_Kez ➜ Chris_Kez • 3 months ago

Interestingly, the surface lot on the far left side of the image
(shown below in more detail) is a parking lot that I actually like-
- if there can be such a thing. It has a second level that's
partially below ground, taking advantage of the sloping street.
That access point is just visible in the bottom part of the lot.
This lot does a good job for the existing businesses along this
street, and it's pretty pedestrian friendly. It is surrounded by
buildings on three sides, rendering it invisible to folks
shopping. The fourth side has a nice sidewalk with lots of trees
as well as additional on-street parking.

see more

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

BTP • 4 months ago

It seems to me that this understates the problem. Take a look at any of these maps -
The Chief Theater, for example. If you cut the parking requirement in half - half! - the
map would still have an impossible number of parking spots. You'd still have this
stupid dead-zone of empty parking lots because cars, man.

The problem is the car itself and the mode of living that we have built around it.

1 ∧ | ∨ • Share ›

Benjamin Ledford ➜ BTP • 4 months ago

I agree. But half would sure be a big step in the right direction. If the requirement was halved and you were allowed to count on-street spaces toward your total (which the city typically allows), then between alley parking and on-street parking you'd be able to do some infill development. Probably not multi-story (except possibly residential), but it would be a start.

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

> **northstar** ➜ Benjamin Ledford • 4 months ago
>
> The requirement should be something like within a 2640ft radius or about 4 blocks, there need to be enough parking spots (on street, public lots, private lots, garages, combined) for typical use, for half of your clientele to drive with four vehicle occupants per car, if something is located in a traditionally built neighborhood. That may still be too much parking.
>
> ∧ | ∨ • Share ›

APC - duplii • 3 months ago

This is where automated parking can be used as a solution. The problem is that the demand for parking will always be there, we don't want to see lands and lands of parking lots or even parking garages for that matter. Automated Parking the reduce the space needed to park cars while keeping the minimum amount of spaces required. Having such a historic place to be filled with parking lots is not ideal, it would be best to think and maximize the spaces to minimize the need for big parking lots.

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

Dan Allison • 3 months ago

Not so much true of Pocatello, which only had rubber tire 'streetcars' (https://en.wikipedia.org/wi..., but most traditional towns were built with the complement of streetcars, reaching out to inner-ring streetcar suburbs. Most people did not drive on a daily basis, but reached downtown on the streetcar. If we want healthy downtowns in the traditional form, we need to not only solve the over-parking problem, but solve the transportation problem. No one should need to use a car to go downtown. Before the troll says, what about the outer suburbs and the exurbs, I will point out that these were built with government subsidy, and resulted in many downtowns dying. We could have instead had new downtowns serving their inner ring suburbs, but that was prevented by the government.

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

ZoomZoomDiva • 4 months ago

The question would be how would you expect people to get to and from the businesses in a broad radius, particularly 1200 a night or even to fill a building such as the Chief Theater? How did people get to and from it in the 1980's, when it was open with a similar culture to today? There is a legitimate concern about making

sure there is enough parking to prevent negative impacts on neighbors and the area. Don't get me wrong, the requirements certainly need revisiting and sound quite excessive. They also do not seem to reflect use of existing lots for multiple purposes, such as an office or bank lot for the theater on evenings and Sunday matinees when the businesses are closed, or to be placed with a + shaped frontage, and then have the parking behind, as I have seen downtowns do.

⌃ | ⌄ • Share ›

jeffk ➜ ZoomZoomDiva • 4 months ago

How do you not read this article and see one gigantic negative impact? We've spent seventy years building cities that look like they were hit with meteors and this is somehow about ten extra people a day driving past your house.

The most insane part of the parking conversation is how it robs otherwise sensible people the complete inability to see anything but their own convenience as a priority, whatever the cost, be it social, fiscal, or environmental.

5 ⌃ | ⌄ • Share ›

ZoomZoomDiva ➜ jeffk • 4 months ago

While I see the overblown requirements as having a negative impact, I don't think one can simply do away with parking in the real world. I do consider convenience to be a leading factor in quality of life, which I think should be a primary goal of communities.

⌃ | ⌄ • Share ›

Jozie ➜ ZoomZoomDiva • 4 months ago

How convenient is it to either have to get back in you car and drive between each destination, or have to walk across a vast sea of mostly empty parking lots between each destination?

What if we had better public transit? Even in smaller towns, a trolley or shuttle on a loop could pick people up from those existing lots and carry them to their destinations. Maybe even just pedicabs during the busiest hours when people have to park further away. I believe there are solutions that don't sacrifice more land for empty, mostly useless space.

3 ⌃ | ⌄ • Share ›

ZoomZoomDiva ➜ Jozie • 4 months ago

Will the public transit be expected to cover its costs like people want drivers to do for roads, or will they continue to be subsidized at a higher percentage than roads, even when a bus does as much damage as the cars of a busload of riders would do. I think there are ways to make parking smarter, but I

am not so diametrically opposed to parking as empty or
useless either.

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

Derek Hofmann → ZoomZoomDiva • 4 months ago

*"There is a legitimate concern about making sure there is enough parking to
prevent negative impacts on neighbors and the area."*

If the neighbors don't want anyone parking in "their" street parking spaces,
they can either make it permit parking or they can privatize those street
parking spaces by purchasing them from the city.

2 ∧ | ∨ • Share ›

ZoomZoomDiva → Derek Hofmann • 4 months ago

I think both of those concepts pose more problems and
inconveniences than they solve, and doesn't take the neighbors and
their quality of life concerns seriously.

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

northstar → ZoomZoomDiva • 4 months ago

If traditional land use business districts weren't in such short
supply due to zoning, the people that currently live in suburban
subdivisions that aren't near anything resembling a functioning
cbd wouldn't need to drive to yours and park up your street.
This is the other half of the issue you describe. So the issue
has to be addressed both in the traditional cbds, as well as in
the new areas that make it impossible to build traditionally.

3 ∧ | ∨ • Share ›

ZoomZoomDiva → northstar • 4 months ago

I cannot imagine the ability to support so many CBD's with so
many businesses in each where one would not frequently
need to travel to the CBD in another neighborhood to purchase
what one wanted, or to engage in the various activities one
wished to engage. I would think part of the survival for the
business would be to attract customers outside of the
immediate neighborhood.

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

northstar → ZoomZoomDiva • 4 months ago

So I've lived in a pretty big college town, a couple dense urban
neighborhoods, the suburbs, and a town built before ww2.
Growing up in the suburbs, every activity required a car. My
parents still live in the burbs, and are 100% car-dependent. In
the college town, which had a very strong downtown, and also
had stroads elsewhere, I could do about 50% of what I needed

to do on foot or bike within the neighborhood, and the rest required a car or bus trip elsewhere. In the urban neighborhoods I lived in, it was closer to 80-90% in-neighborhood, with the only car use being work related, or heading out of town, or going to the far end of the metro for an event. In the prewar town, which has an okay downtown, and which the town has chosen to emphasize as a tourist destination rather than a town shopping area, I can do about 40% of what I need to do in-neighborhood/on foot or bike. The place my parents live and where I grew up, in my experience, is representative of almost everything that has been built since at least 1970, in the sense that it is not near anything. If you consider the number of people living in such areas, who have no access to anything on foot (meaning a 10-15 minute walk away), that are currently not served by any cbd or neighborhood cbd, then you should understand why eliminating most zoning so that traditional development can occur would have a pretty dramatic effect in reducing the required amount of car travel for a huge chunk of the population, and alleviate many of the parking problems in existing neighborhood cbds, which people who are currently 100% un-served today would no longer need to visit. I would much rather see my town focus its development efforts on serving existing residents in the neighborhoods than catering to others that have to drive there and require huge amounts of parking.

1 ∧ | ∨ • Share ›

ZoomZoomDiva ➜ northstar • 4 months ago

I grew up in a rural area, miles away from the nearest commercial building. I went to college in an urban largely residential area. In that case, there were some things we walked to, but mostly a car was still much more convenient. My point is even if a CBD is close, I may want things or do business with entities in another CBD or community completely. I don't do everything in my current suburb, and will go to another one for things I prefer. I don't see that changing. As people, I think we are much more mobile than we used to be, and not as connected to geography.

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

northstar ➜ ZoomZoomDiva • 4 months ago

Of course, not everyone will live 100% within their neighborhood. I never said they would. You don't seem to be grasping a couple pretty obvious things: in many places, because it is literally illegal to build traditional neighborhood business districts or traditional mixed use neighborhoods, you

business districts or traditional mixed use neighborhoods, you are forced to use a car, since walking to businesses several miles away is not practical. This situation describes the majority of development after ww2. This is also why traditional cbds tend to have the perception of not having enough parking: they have plenty of parking for local customers (who will tend to walk, but some of whom will be lazy or disabled and want/need parkingg), and a little extra parking for people from farther out (who would either need to ride a bike, take transit, or drive) - since people will want some things from outside their own neighborhood, the assumption being that "elsewhere" also has a business district that is walkable from its surrounding residential. What this means is that if we allow traditional development patterns, eventually, there won't need to be ridiculous amounts of parking, as prior to ww2 and the zoning we're dealing with today, towns as a rule were built in a way that made it possible to live within your neighborhood. The fact that today's cbds would need so much parking is more symptomatic of a lacking supply of neighborhood cbds. Regarding local parking for local clientele, I've found that limiting parking acts as a disincentive to driving, in the sense that in fully built out neighborhoods, it takes at least as long to drive, park, and get to the destination, as it does to walk or ride a bike - and this is feature rather than a bug because it makes driving less desirable, and in so doing keeps things closer together, making walking/biking more desirable, which keeps my neighborhood cleaner, and safer from speeding cars.

2 ∧ | ∨ • Share ›

ZoomZoomDiva ➔ northstar • 4 months ago

That model requires everyone, or at least a significant majority of a region, to live in "traditional development patterns" for it to work. That is why I think there needs to be thought around a "Modified Traditional Development" concept that realizes there will be more driving than took place 70 or more years ago and faces that realization honestly while retaining most of the features of traditional developments. How do we make it all work together?

I also question the lack of scale, and the efficiencies and economies associated with having so much repetition of the same or similar. I already think many chain stores are too saturated.

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

Cobo ➔ ZoomZoomDiva • 4 months ago

If a small town can support a CBD, why couldn't a neighborhood?

ZoomZoomDiva ➔ Cobo • 4 months ago

I think it would be inefficient to attempt to have so many CBD's, particularly when we are already saying there is too much space devoted to retail and services. It seems like a great deal of replication. A small town acts as a center for miles around to provide services and goods to the area to achieve the best scale and base it can.

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

Derek Hofmann ➔ ZoomZoomDiva • 4 months ago

I see, giving people the means to solve their own problems is not taking their problems seriously.

1 ∧ | ∨ • Share ›

ZoomZoomDiva ➔ Derek Hofmann • 4 months ago

I think the community punting on the problem and making people solve the problem the community is making themselves, particularly at their expense, is not taking their concerns seriously.

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

Derek Hofmann ➔ ZoomZoomDiva • 4 months ago

A neighborhood that isn't willing to solve their own problems should not be taken seriously.

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

ZoomZoomDiva ➔ Derek Hofmann • 4 months ago

I do not think it is reasonable for the community or other entities to create problems for the neighborhood, and then simply say to the neighborhood "here, you fix it and pay all the costs of fixing it".

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

Benjamin Ledford ➔ ZoomZoomDiva • 4 months ago

Who is deciding what is a "problem" here? I find it to be a problem when I can't find a pleasant, walkable neighborhood to live and work in. I find extensive parking lots to be a quality of life concern. I find it to be a problem that I can't develop a vacant lot because it can't fit the amount of parking required by the city. Those are all problems created by our regulations. The problems you're talking about are not forced on anyone - people are free to live and work where they choose. If they think a suburban, auto-oriented development gives them a

higher quality of life, they can live there. But what of those of us who think our quality of life is higher in a traditional neighborhood? Are we to be forbidden from creating such a place? Currently, the answer is yes.

Unless the neighborhood is already existing, in which case it's so valuable that we can't afford to lose it. That's the irony.

3 ∧ | ∨ • Share ›

ZoomZoomDiva ↱ Benjamin Ledford • 4 months ago

I was agreeing with you that regulations need to be revisited and likely modified. However, I also think the concept that cars be entirely disregarded is not realistic in a commercial area. You came up with some very good and creative answers with where they can feasibly go. I think that mindset needs to be applied in making areas that can satisfy the wants of people seeking a walkable neighborhood, but also meet the wants of those who will visit and do commerce in that area.

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

Derek Hofmann ↱ ZoomZoomDiva • 4 months ago

The neighborhood caused its own problem long ago when it built its streets wide and asked the city to pay for it, including the recurring maintenance and opportunity costs. And now the neighborhood wants to make their self-imposed problem worse by taking property rights from their neighbors? Don't you think that's astonishingly selfish?

1 ∧ | ∨ • Share ›

ZoomZoomDiva ↱ Derek Hofmann • 4 months ago

Making a street with 2 traffic lanes and parallel parking on each side is not building the streets "wide", and should be considered the basic responsibility of the city to provide to its residents as a common infrastructure good. This is a pretty standard street built even in the pre-car era in many cities. The neighborhood is merely doing what you think the neighborhood should do - make people take care of their own problems. I don't think that is selfish.

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

Derek Hofmann ↱ ZoomZoomDiva • 4 months ago

If a residential street with 2 traffic lanes and parking on both sides is not wide, then what would be wide to you?

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

ZoomZoomDiva ↱ Derek Hofmann • 4 months ago

I would consider anything with 4 or more traffic lanes, plus parking, to be wide.

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

Derek Hofmann ➔ ZoomZoomDiva • 4 months ago

That's a highway, not a street!

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

ZoomZoomDiva ➔ Derek Hofmann • 4 months ago

LOL! I know many streets that fit within that parameter, as major thoroughfares in the city. Some do have highway monikers, others don't.

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

Derek Hofmann ➔ ZoomZoomDiva • 4 months ago

That's not a street, that's a stroad. Here is an example. I would not want to live on that stroad!

1 ∧ | ∨ • Share ›

ZoomZoomDiva ➔ Derek Hofmann • 4 months ago

Is the whole town that unattractive? It isn't the thoroughfare that is the issue. It is the lack of life. Probably not made for the Southwest.

∧ | ∨ • Share ›

Derek Hofmann ➔ ZoomZoomDiva • 4 months ago

Funny, I thought you would find the wide, straight roads and

Newer / Older

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