Free Parking or Livable Cities? An Urban Planning Controversy

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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When the automobile rose in popularity, Americans had trouble finding parking. In response, local governments announced various zoning ordinances throughout the 20th century. One such law is the parking requirement, mandating urban planners to provide minimum number of free parking spaces dependent on land use. For example, Washington D.C. requires "libraries constructed after December 19, 2003, and in excess of 2,000 square feet of gross floor area, 1 space for each additional 1,000 square feet of gross floor area" (DC Office of Zoning, 1958). While many now enjoy this ample supply of parking, critics of said ordinances have organized in the 21st century. From cyclists to small town developers, these social groups raise awareness to subtle, adverse side effects of the laws. Opponents of parking minimums allege such ordinances are wasteful, promote urban sprawl, and perpetuate car dependency. They favor granting local officials the discretion they need to pursue livability, sustainability, and social equity.

Review of Research

Researchers have studied parking mandates and the competing values that divide their defenders from their critics. Shoup (1999) has argued parking minimums emerged from engineers overestimating parking demand by only surveying free parking sites. Lewyn (2010) classifies minimum parking requirements as an example of government regulation "where the social harm caused by regulation outweighs the harm prevented." Parking minimums encourage more driving, worsening congestion and pollution. In his book *High Cost of Free Parking*, Shoup (2005) contends that free parking is not free: everyone, even non-drivers, subsidize parking as maintenance costs force governments and businesses to increase prices on goods and services. Lehe (2018) supports this contention, showing that parking costs are "passed on to

housing customers" and disincentivizing construction of affordable units for lower-income households. Shoup (2005) offers his solution: a performance-based model where parking prices vary depending on current demand.

Other research has analyzed causes and consequences of urban sprawl, defined as the horizontal expansion of development away from a city. Nechyba and Walsh (2004) finds it "difficult to imagine large increases in suburbanization without" the rise of automobiles throughout the 20th century. Researchers also give credit to federal policies like the Federal Aid Highway Act that funded the interstate highway system and the Federal Housing Administration's mortgage policies incentivizing construction of "low-density, single-family home subdivisions" (Freilich & Peshoff, 1997; Peiser, 2001). Some researchers argue that sprawl exacerbates gentrification because access to suburban jobs practically requires a car (Freilich & Peshoff, 1997; Meredith, 2003). Clark and Harvey (1965) contend that the most common consequence of sprawl is that the rate of horizontal expansion outpaces local government's ability to financially manage these new developments. When analyzing what critics blame sprawls for producing, Peiser (2001) agrees with critics that sprawls cause inefficient infrastructure, but disagrees that sprawls catalyzed big-box retail and strip development.

New urbanism is a reaction to the urban sprawl, moving back to traditionalist cities focused around pedestrians. The movement is controversial; some argue that it cannot apply its own philosophy. Grant (2006) contends that while new urbanists strive to develop the public sphere into democratic communities emulating the traditional urban centers of the 19th century, the movement builds projects that are elitist and exacerbate gentrification. Beauregard (2002) believes new urbanism suffers from "chronic ambiguity" as it sits between modernism and post-modernism, making it "less a journey to a safe and stable new world than a complex negotiation

of a deeply divided present." Others attribute its ineffectiveness to a schism among American new urbanists. According to Marshall (2003), West Coast new urbanism focuses on regional planning and transit investment while the East focuses on "reconstruction of redesigned subdivisions that mimic small towns." Comparing two Florida towns, Marshall (2003) contends the East Coast branch is destructive in its priority of style over substance. The poorer Kissimmee should be the textbook new urbanist settlement, yet praise goes instead to the wealthier Celebration, which is just "a contemporary automobile suburb pretending to be a nineteenth-century town" (Marshall, 2003). New urbanism is not ineffective, rather, most of its members value incorrect priorities. While these studies have developed economic models and analyzed theory, none have sufficiently explained how free parking critics apply their values into practice.

Excessive parking minimums

Critics contend that parking requirements are wasteful because the empty lots prevent placement of more valuable properties. Strong Towns advocates for fiscal sustainability and local autonomy in planning. It recognizes it can be difficult to visualize this opportunity cost: "outcry is common when drivers fear their access to convenient, free parking will be threatened ... But it's far rarer to see ordinary Americans up in arms about all the things we're missing out on because we prioritize parking over building great places" (Herriges, n.d.). While supporters of Donald Shoup, Strong Towns labels his works as "beloved mainly by planners and policy geeks," preferring simple, anecdotal evidence on social media over complex, quantitative evaluations in academic journals (Herriges, n.d.). One of these campaigns is #BlackFridayParking, meant to showcase the overabundance of parking. Every Black Friday, participants travel to their local shopping mall, take pictures of empty parking lots, and upload

them onto social media websites like Twitter. With consumerism at its peak during Black Friday, disseminating evidence of empty lots contradicts claims that large swaths of free parking are necessary. Users include the tag "#iwishthisparkingwas" to convey desires of what this space could be instead (Strong Towns, n.d.). Aside from awareness campaigns, social groups expose parking minimum's excessiveness through repurposing. The Incremental Development Alliance (IDA) is a non-profit organization that advises small towns through its network of engineers, local entrepreneurs, planners, and developers. Cofounder Monte Anderson repurposes old stripped shopping centers and buildings in Dallas. Monte believes derelict properties can be reused, but costly parking analyses are required that ensure the minimum parking quotas are met. To Monte, these requirements hamstring and sometimes even kill incremental development: "without adjustments to parking requirements, there are businesses that cannot be used" (Marohn, 2017). American cities are bloated with parking, pushing away beautiful and valuable development.

Social groups also show parking minimums are wasteful by contrasting it to the merits of its alternatives. Certain cities have experimented with performance-based pricing, and Shoupsitas have organized to defend the namesake's theory from opposition groups' misinformation and sensationalist campaigns. William Fulton, who became a Shoupista after attending Shoup's planning courses, served as mayor of Ventura from 2009 to 2011. During his tenure, he received backlash over his proposal to install parking meters downtown (Fulton, 2018). The motivation was to ease congestion: "demand was so high for the prime spaces that people were cruising up and down Main Street, causing a constant traffic jam …a half-block away, parking lots and a parking garage sat empty" (Fulton, 2015). Local Tea Party members led by Carla Bonney and Gary Parker organized opposition around the premise that the parking meters took away freedom

(VCR, 2011). Ventura denizens were double taxed: one from meters and two from public infrastructure maintenance. However, contrary to the fears of merchants that the policy would decrease business, downtown experienced a 40% drop in crime and 3% boost in retail sales (Fulton, 2011). By showing that the program actually improved the area, Fulton removed the practical basis to Tea Party's opposition and exposed the opportunistic attempt to push the Party's nationwide agenda. Carla's group spread false claims that residents would be charged excessively to park in front of their own homes. They claimed the parking meters were a catalyst for implementing Agenda 21. Rather than a plan for sustainable development, Tea Party members nationwide view Agenda 21 as a "worldwide plot to undermine private property and threaten other freedoms" (Fulton, 2011) and an elusive enemy that will "destroy the middle-class way of life" (Carey, 2012).

Another battleground over paid parking reforms has been the Bay Area. In Oakland, the city council announced plans to increase meter rates and extend meter enforcement times to reduce the budget deficit (Rhodes, 2009). In hearings for the policy's reevaluation, small business owners like Allen Michaan blamed the plan for hurting businesses: "what kind of city government attacks its own residents … just to raise revenues?" (Rhodes, 2009). Michaan claimed this plan was "a catalyst for its [Oakland's] failure," and that irreparable damage had already been done: "you've basically shattered my business and thousands of others all over town" (Roth, 2009b). The plan survived with the help of Shoupistas who argued that "free parking doesn't actually help businesses," echoing the teachings of Donald Shoup (Rhodes, 2009). They also accused Michaan of sensationalism: "I do not believe that you guys [Council] scared everybody out of Oakland's parking spaces, I believe Alan Michaan did by getting on the 6 o'clock news and telling everyone to be terrified of [paid] parking" (Roth, 2009b).

Concurrently, debate ensued over two San Francisco Municipal Transit Authority (SFMTA) policies: the extension of metered parking enforcement times in certain commercial areas and SFpark, the installation of performance-pricing meters. Learning from the chaos in Oakland, SFMTA published a comprehensive analysis justifying their Shoupian parking policies and showing variable pricing eases congestion (Roth, 2009a). However, opposition centered around the Building Owners and Management Association (BOMA) remained dubious: "most of the residents and businesses are not prepared to pay more for parking" (Roth, 2009c). Analogous to the Tea Party, the anti-war coalition Act Now to Stop War and End Racism (A.N.S.W.E.R.) formed their argument around populism: "Stop the Parking Meter Hike! Make the rich pay, not the workers!" (Roth, 2009c). The social group contends that such policies punish the poor and working class by "having their cars stolen from them because of this random taxation" (Roth, 2009c). Public transit-friendly groups such as the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition and Livable City criticized A.N.S.W.E.R. for assuming the poor could afford automobiles: "the crocodile tears I hear for the working class? The real working class, the real poor, they're on the bus" (Roth, 2009c). Other free parking supporters organized by locality, preventing SFpark from expanding into their neighborhoods. Their arguments, like that of A.N.S.W.E.R., are emotionally charged. Eastern Neighborhoods United Front (ENUF) has attacked SFpark, likening its methods to those of the disgraced company Enron (Bialick, 2012). Save Polk Street has protested cyclist-friendly policies that displace curb parking. A member, Chris Provan, blamed bike lanes for hurting his book store, and fears that further removal of free parking would exacerbate the damage. Shoupistas note that Provan conveniently ignores the rise in internet shopping as a probable cause (Bialick, 2013). Labeling the opposition groups' arguments as misinformed,

cherry-picked, and exaggerated, defenders of Shoupian theory ensure the survival of their programs.

Social groups also argue that parking minimums encourage automobile use, making cities less safe for pedestrians. 1000 Friends of Wisconsin is an interest group that advocates for environmentally-friendly policies that preserve economic benefits and healthy communities. 1000 Friends criticizes mandatory parking minimums for making cities inhospitable for pedestrians. In suburbs, “vast parking lots encourage users to drive and make pedestrians feel out of place” (1000 Friends, 2020a). The group supports reduction of lot sizes. The IDA also argues that modern-day streets are dangerous for pedestrians. In IDA’s ideal town, people would be allowed to perform daily errands “ideally on a street where you won't be run over coming or going. That's the bare minimum” (Kumon, 2015). IDA excludes parking lots in their vision of a healthy community: “the more connected a place you rebuild or develop in, the less land and resources you need to allocate for parking and the other amenities that you would need in a disconnected suburban location” (Steuteville, 2017). Strong Towns founder Chuck Marohn voices concern for school children’s safety as pedestrians when he argues against placing parking lots in urban schools. Since many urban children walk to and from school, drivers near school zones would be cautious around these “random and chaotic” walking patterns (Marohn, n.d.). By showing inconveniences to both pedestrians and drivers as a result of this project, Marohn reveals the incompatibility between urban and suburban planning. Beyond parking, organized groups also criticize overarching planning ideas. Suburbia, or urban sprawl, is one of the main targets.

Unsustainable and unproductive sprawls

Social groups criticize parking by attacking infrastructure that encourages automobile use and subsequently parking demand. One target has been post-World War II development patterns that facilitated horizontal city expansion through federal and state government subsidies (Marohn, 2011a). Under this system, Strong Towns observes that "cities routinely trade near-term cash advantages associated with new growth for long-term financial obligations associated with maintenance of infrastructure" (Marohn, 2011b). On the surface, this system has made cities prosper. However, Strong Towns contends that its analyses show that a city loses money as the maintenance costs outpace the revenues. Provocatively calling this pattern the "Growth Ponzi Scheme," Strong Towns argues that "our places do not create wealth, they destroy wealth. Our development pattern—the American style of building our places—is simply not productive enough to sustain itself" (Marohn, 2011b). Under this framework, participant groups criticize development patterns that stunt long-term growth.

By separating businesses from homes, suburban sprawls are criticized for their economic unproductiveness. One business archetype that activists target are big box retail stores for their role in the "Ponzi Scheme." A big box retailer pays the up-front costs of constructing a store, letting the city reap the job growth and tax revenue for free. The problem arises when the city must handle the long-term maintenance. According to Strong Towns, these stores "are designed to be abandoned. They are throw-away buildings with a shelf life of twelve to fifteen years" (Marohn, 2016a). After the expiration date, cities experience losses from these stores, and the expendable big box and its sizable parking lots becomes poster children for Strong Town's #blackfridayparking event. IDA founder Monte has first-hand exposure to this "Ponzi Scheme" when repurposing Dallas's strip malls and their sea of parking. These places become

unproductive and barren after the big box anchor tenant moves away, corroborating the Strong Towns' theory. Witnessing countless towns lack money to tear down these failed projects, Monte paints a bleak picture: "you got properties that could actually damage us for the next 100 years, a cancer right in the middle of a place" (Marohn, 2017). Other IDA members describe the big box retail system "more like strip mining than gardening" (Steuteville, 2017). They criticize big box stores for taking profits elsewhere instead of recirculating profits within the community. Strong Towns faults the federal and state governments. Laws restrict local governments' sources of income, forcing them to rely on short term relief like big box contracts. When two cities compete for a contract, the result is pyrrhic: one city loses out on tax revenue while the other shoulders long-term costs (Marohn, 2016b).

Social groups use the "Ponzi scheme" concept to discredit groups that believe America's economic rehabilitation comes through large projects. Estimating that major infrastructure rehabilitation projects would cost up to $5 trillion, the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) suggests the federal government increase investment from 2.5 to 3.5 percent of US Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2025 (ASCE, 2017). Their solution is top-down: "through strategic, sustained investment, bold leadership, thoughtful planning, and careful preparation for the needs of the future" (ASCE, 2017). In a press release revealing that 40 percent of US bridges need repair, the American Road & Transportation Builders Association (ARTBA) recommends the Trump administration provide the Highway Trust Fund a permanent revenue stream (ARTBA, 2019). Strong Towns criticizes organizations like the ASCE and ARTBA for lacking vocabulary on financial sustainability in their list of solutions (Marohn, 2009). Pouring trillions into unprofitable infrastructure that quickly deteriorates in 20 years is short-sighted. It diverts attention away from useful investments that spur permanent, long-term growth. 1000 Friends

criticizes Wisconsin for spending billions on national highway projects “that in addition to harming communities will likely be underused due to changing technology and demographics” (1000 Friends, n.d.). One common theme in their argument is social inequity. Analyzing 1950 Milwaukee, 1000 Friends says that highway construction displaced vibrant African American communities. Any untouched communities experience 75% more emissions than white neighborhoods (1000 Friends, 2020b). 1000 Friends contends that “these projects destroyed minority communities, increased greenhouse gas emissions, and strained local and state budgets, all in the name of reducing suburban commute times” (1000 Friends, 2020b). A contemporary battle has been over a project to expand freeway I-94 in Milwaukee. Several labor unions like the Wisconsin Laborers’ District Council support the expansion as it increases local jobs, especially to minority and women-owned businesses who will receive around $100 million in contracts according to the National Association of Minority Contractors (Raines et al., 2021). They urge immediate action, describing the current conditions on I-94 as “outdated, congested, and unsafe” (Raines et al., 2021). In response, 1000 Friends cites studies that show congestion increases as roads are widened, safety decreases as more cars use the interstate, and gentrification increases as minorities rarely use cars (Steiner et al., 2020). Strong Towns offers an alternative, a bottom-up approach that starts with local governments: “a system that relies more on national politicians and not local markets to set spending priorities will inevitably create massive financial waste” (Marohn, 2009). America needs to relearn placemaking, the practice of building places with positive financial returns. The federal government will never understand the nuances of each town, so the best policy makers for this problem are the local governments.

Creating walkable cities through local governments

To remedy free parking problems, organized groups promote performance-based pricing and elimination of parking requirements. To remedy urban sprawl, they promote bottom-up development. Both require an empowered local government, and participant groups advocate policies promoting independent local governance. To curb towns' dependence on big box retail, Strong Town campaigns for "states to stop being helicopter parents and actually grant cities the autonomy to set their own local tax policy" (Marohn, 2016b). Cities can tune policies to their local ecosystem. 1000 Friend's solution to Wisconsin's cash crunch are regional transportation authorities (RTA), which allow local governments to organize and raise money. They argue Wisconsin graduates leave the state for cities with better public transit. RTAs would prevent this brain drain by giving local governments more opportunities to obtain funding for local roads, public transportation, and bike lanes (1000 Friends, 2018). Livable City's activism was not isolated to SFpark. The group eliminated parking minimums in "transit-rich areas of the city," culminating in SFMTA's decision to completely remove said laws citywide in 2018 (Tom, 2019).

Besides advocacy, organized groups implement their own programs. The IDA views current community development solutions to financial instability as time-consuming, relying too much on tax subsidies, grants, and government resources (Tucker, 2017). The solution instead lies locally at the neighborhood scale: "move boldly, in small increments" (Kumon, 2015). Incremental development is seen as a faster, less expensive alternative better suited to creating opportunities to build wealth in communities. The dream vision are adaptable human scale neighborhoods that build "a local culture which grows its own economic assets and establishes long term wealth for its citizens" (Kumon, 2015). Using IDA's self-sufficient philosophy, towns

eschew top-down federal aid and instead incrementally morphs to meet changing demands. In their developer training workshop, the IDA teaches the economy of means: “small deals, small amounts of capital, small crews, services from small architecture and engineering shops, and small sites that make a difference in the neighborhood” (Kumon, 2015). By reducing the scale to low-risk projects, incremental developers gain a competitive advantage over larger developers by working closely with neighborhoods and circumventing financial constraints. Livable City’s Sunday Streets program temporarily converts roads into car-free havens for local business and recreational opportunities. The events “inspire people to think about their streets as public spaces” and show them benefits to planning around people (Livable City, n.d.).

The Sunday Streets program conveys participant groups’ belief that success hinges on establishing strong bonds with local communities. Monte believes that all projects must attract customers closest to it: “if you can sell to the local neighborhood, you probably got a successful business” (Marohn, 2017). Livable City agrees with Monte. In its Livable Neighborhood campaign, it promotes examples of high-density, vibrant communities around the city, helping small businesses compete against corporations. (Livable City, 2020a; Livable City, 2020b). The Neighborhood Empowerment Network (NEN)’s Neighborfest brings residents together, facilitating discussions that “attracts new community members, strengthens social networks,” and hone disaster readiness (NEN, n.d.). Mayor Fulton (2011) believes the Tea Party failed because it was “never in touch with Ventura’s voters.” While Venturans may agree with Tea Party’s fiscal policies, they “don’t usually fall for hyperbole, half-truths, or overheated conspiracy theories” (Fulton, 2011). The A.N.S.W.E.R. coalition fared similarly, claiming that SFpark would hurt the poorer minority groups by discouraging driving. By citing studies showing that three quarters of San Francisco shoppers walk, bike, or use public transit, local

Shoupistas expose A.N.S.W.E.R.'s ignorance (Roth, 2009a). Monte Anderson of the IDA also values this relationship: "pick a place and stay with it for the rest of your life…I really mean this because what will happen is if you do a project that doesn't do so good, doesn't make money, you've still fixed something up, still done something, so even in a loss you gain" (IDA, n.d.). Participant groups gain trust by accompanying towns through tough times, in contrast to big box stores that leave after short-term profits have dried up. Monte applies his own advice when convincing cities to lower parking minimums. He and the IDA must be knowledgeable about intricacies of each neighborhood to obtain sufficient evidence proving that a property can survive with fewer parking (Marohn, 2017). A bottoms-up movement requires towns, and towns cannot be won over without its populace.

Conclusion

Commenting on the debate over parking policies in the Bay Area, a councilmember noted: "Screw with a person's taxes and you have a heated discussion, screw with their parking, and you have a revolution" (Roth, 2009b). In the 21st century, organized critics of parking minimums have begun their own revolution. To eliminate parking requirements, the groups must lure the public away from the automobile. Curtailing automobile dependence cannot occur without simultaneously exposing problems with car-centric planning principles. The automobile has become entrenched in everyday Americans' lives, so these organized groups favor a subtle, incremental revolution. The goal is not to abolish the automobile, but to deprioritize it. For a century, cars have dominated urban planning philosophy. It is time to remind Americans of the merits of putting people first.

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