

Testimony of Steven Jones¹: Zoning Commission Public Roundtable

Before the District of Columbia Zoning Commission
July 31, 2008

Summary

The Zoning Commission should enact the District Office of Planning's (OP) proposed zoning code changes to eliminate many off-street parking requirements as market forces most often do a better job of determining minimum parking requirements. Additionally, while government mandated minimum parking requirements address the *creation* of spaces for car storage they do not address the *use* of the spaces for that purpose. Owners or users of the space often make a rational decision that the space intended for car storage has a higher and better use and that car storage can be more cheaply provided on the street. Finally, given the goals and vision of the Comprehensive Plan the use of government mandates would be better used to provide public transit and other multi-modal transportation enhancements.

Introduction

My name is Steven E. Jones and I am a native Washington currently living in the Foggy Bottom/West End neighborhood. I want to thank the Zoning Commission for this opportunity to testify at this Roundtable in support the Office of Planning's proposed zoning code changes. While I am speaking tonight in an individual capacity, my comments reflect years of experience working with real estate developers and financial institutions providing strategic financial services and hours spent providing input as a member of the Comprehensive Plan Task Force. Most recently I have been working to develop underwriting standards that seek to address the relative value of green building practices.

Historical Context

Parking minimums began being broadly adopted in the mid 20th Century when our society was in the midst of policy of aggressively promoting automobile use and automobile-based land development. This was believed to be the best way to increase mobility at minimal cost to society. Former GM President Charles Wilson's statement that "What's good for the country is good for GM and vice versa" captures the sentiment of the time quite well.

While there were many benefits, we now know that the costs of these policies were much greater than we imagined in terms of air quality degradation, loss of habitat, water pollution, energy dependence, obesity, etc. We now need policies that contribute to the vision of the city outlined in the Comprehensive Plan. The Transportation Goal is to "Create a safe, sustainable, efficient, multi-modal transportation system that meets the access and mobility needs of District residents, the regional workforce, and visitors; supports local and regional economic prosperity; and enhances the quality of life for District residents."

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Elimination of Parking Minimums

Market Approach to Parking Demand

The Comprehensive Plan calls for unbundling of parking costs for residential units. This reflects the understanding that the greatest efficiency is achieved when the costs and benefits of a product or service are most directly associated with those incurring the cost or receiving the benefit. In my work with real estate developers and investors, I have seen that the market is keenly aware of the existing demand for parking and understands the value of meeting that demand. On-site parking represents an enhancement for the tenant/purchaser and/or a revenue stream for the property owner. Any developer that does not address the associated parking demand will have a hard time getting financing. Accordingly, developers will provide as much parking as their analyses suggest the market will bear and it will be priced to meet that demand. This I believe represents the best mechanism for determining parking requirements and is clearly superior to a government mandate.

Minimum Parking Requirements Only Address the Creation of Off-Street Parking Spaces

One of the primary justifications for minimum parking requirements is to lessen the “spillover effect” of new development. In theory, if the parking demand for the development is handled on-site, the impact on the existing community will be minimal. This approach supposes that parking demand is static rather than dynamic. However, car owners are constantly re-evaluating the best use of space available to them. Even though a property may have adequate parking for its use, owners often decide that the space is more valuable used as a storage area, accessory apartment or workshop and that the car can be stored on the street.

Similarly, the choice of an existing resident to purchase a second or third car that will is then parked on the street lessens the available street parking. However, this property owner is not required to store that car on his/her own property. Over time the choices of individual property owners can have much the same impact on available street parking as a new development.

Therefore, I support elimination of parking minimums in order to achieve the Comprehensive Plan’s vision.

Public Transportation Access Enhancements

Finally, I’d like to make the case for a 21st Century approach to the issue. Just like parking minimums were designed to make it easy for people to store their cars on-site, we can adopt policies that make it easy for people to take transit, walk or bike to their destination. In a recent conversation with a senior executive of a major international brokerage and real estate investment firm stated that major pension funds and investors were increasingly interested in properties with easy, high quality access to public transit because of its desirability for tenants and the positive impact on issues like climate change. They were less interested in automobile-dependent properties and development. We know that proximity to a transit station or bus stop makes it easy for people to use transit. We also know that the quality of the access to transit increases the likelihood that people will choose to use transit. I would propose that the Zoning Commission adopt policies that encourage property owners to enhance the quality access to nearby transit or other desirable modes of transportation.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I look forward to working with the Zoning Commission in achieving the goals and vision of the Comprehensive Plan.