

Resolution to support removal of minimum parking requirements

WHEREAS, Whatcom Democrats believes that promoting safe and sustainable transportation options, reducing community carbon emissions, and increasing housing affordability are critical issues facing Whatcom County that require “all of the above” solutions.

WHEREAS, the United States devotes about 7.5 million acres of paved land devoted to parking, an amount about equal to the entire area of Massachusetts.¹

WHEREAS, the concept of removing minimum parking requirements refers to the practice of eliminating the mandatory number of parking spaces that project planners, businesses, and homeowners are required to build and maintain at existing and new buildings.

WHEREAS, local governments began to impose these minimum parking requirements in the 1950s and 1960s based on an argument that cities should ensure open and available parking for all residents, visitors, and businesses.

WHEREAS, there is a growing movement among urban planners, transportation experts, and advocates for sustainable and vibrant communities to reconsider and remove these requirements.

WHEREAS, minimum parking requirements are inconsistent, arbitrary, and regressive. For example, Bellingham currently requires 4 parking spaces per bowling lane², Ferndale requires 3³, Lynden requires 5⁴, Burlington requires 10⁵, and Mt. Vernon requires 5 per bowling alley.⁶

WHEREAS, the primary advantages of removing minimum parking requirements include:

1. **Cost savings:** Parking infrastructure is expensive, adding significant costs to development projects (one parking space per residential unit increases development costs by about 12.5%, and two parking spaces per unit increase costs by about 25% in typical urban developments)⁷. By eliminating minimum parking requirements, project planners can allocate resources to other aspects of the project, such as housing, public amenities, or green space, which enables more economically viable developments and increased housing for people instead of housing for cars.

¹ [Whatcom Housing Alliance. Parking Policy and Housing Affordability.](#)

² BMC 20.36.050.

³ FMC 18.76.070.

⁴ LMC 19.51.040.

⁵ BMC 17.85.060.

⁶ MVMC 17.84.030(C).

⁷ [Whatcom Housing Alliance. Parking Policy and Housing Affordability.](#)

2. **Efficient land use:** Minimum parking requirements require allocation of a substantial amount of land to vehicle storage. By eliminating these requirements, available land is made available for other more efficient users, such as housing, offices, retail spaces, or green space (a 10% increase in minimum parking requirements is associated with a 6% decrease in housing density in urban areas).⁸ This promotes denser and more vibrant urban environments, reducing urban sprawl and supporting sustainable growth.
3. **Reduced traffic:** Minimum parking requirements often result in an oversupply of parking spaces, leading to excessive personal vehicle use and increased traffic congestion (a 10% increase in minimum parking requirements is associated with a 5% increase in vehicles per square mile).⁹ Removing these requirements enables alternative modes of transportation like walking, biking, and public transit, by allowing for denser development, pedestrianized spaces, and increased safety for other modes. The associated shift away from personal vehicle use also alleviates traffic congestion, which improves outcomes for all modes of transportation.
4. **Enhanced walkability, bikeability, and livability:** When minimum parking requirements are eliminated, project planners and cities are empowered to prioritize pedestrian and bike-friendly design elements, leading to more vibrant streetscapes, multi-use paths, and improved community connectivity for residents and visitors. It also promotes a sense of community and encourages people to spend time in public spaces.
5. **Reduced environmental harm:** First, impervious surface lots and parking structures prevent groundwater infiltration and increase storm water run-off. This run-off increases downstream erosion and flooding (a 1% increase in impervious surfaces in an area increases flood magnitudes by 3.3%)¹⁰ as well as pollution of streams, lakes, and coastal waters, all of which are critical issues in Whatcom County and to the Salish Sea. Excessive runoff also imposes significant stormwater treatment costs. Second, parking lots reduce densities and spread development over a larger area, hindering use of less greenhouse gas-intensive modes of transportation.¹¹ This in-turn promotes use of personal vehicles that lead to traffic congestion, air pollution, and poor public health.
6. **Flexibility and adaptability:** Parking needs can vary significantly depending on the location, type of development, and time of day. Removing minimum parking requirements allows project planners, homeowners, and businesses flexibility in determining the number of parking spaces needed based on true market demand and the specific context, not arbitrary rules. This adaptability enables more tailored and efficient use of land and resources.

⁸ [Whatcom Housing Alliance. Parking Policy and Housing Affordability.](#)

⁹ [Whatcom Housing Alliance. Parking Policy and Housing Affordability.](#)

¹⁰ [Whatcom Housing Alliance. Parking Policy and Housing Affordability.](#)

¹¹ [The environmental and economic costs of sprawling parking lots in the United States, Davis et. al \(2009\).](#)

WHEREAS, eliminating minimum parking requirements is a stated goal of the 2019 Bellingham Climate Action Task Force¹² and the 2016 Bellingham Comprehensive Plan.¹³

WHEREAS, eliminating minimum parking requirements would advance the stated goals of the 2021 Whatcom County Climate Action Plan¹⁴ by 1) reducing vehicle miles traveled through promotion of alternatives to single occupancy vehicle transportation and 2) reducing the area of impervious services to help manage higher frequency, magnitude, and duration of stormwater flows.

WHEREAS, minimum parking requirements add anywhere from \$20,000 (for surface parking) to \$40,000 (for above ground parking) to \$80,000 or more (for structured parking), increasing the price of new housing when Whatcom County has a historic shortage of affordable housing.¹⁵

WHEREAS, minimum parking requirements add roughly 15% to rental costs.¹⁶

WHEREAS, minimum parking requirements are unjust as they require generally lower income renters and homeowners who do not own motor vehicles to subsidize parking for those who do own such vehicles. As the price of parking is typically bundled with rent, households do not get to decide how much parking they want to purchase.

WHEREAS, removing minimum parking requirements does not eliminate existing parking or prevent the construction of new parking, but instead allows for a nuanced and context-specific approach in alignment with Whatcom County's goals of building sustainable and livable communities.

WHEREAS, removing minimum parking requirements is not the same as and would not prevent local governments from implementing even more progressive land use policies, like parking maximums, mandatory shared parking arrangements, or other innovative transportation solutions to prioritize alternative modes of transportation.

WHEREAS, eliminating parking requirements gives property owners the freedom to provide parking based on market demand rather than arbitrary code-based minimums.

WHEREAS, if and when a property owner chooses to provide parking, they will still be subject to accessibility standards as set forth in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

WHEREAS, cities across the United States and Canada, including San Francisco, San Jose, Berkeley, Sacramento, Anchorage, Austin, South Bend, Gainesville, Minneapolis, St. Paul,

¹² Goal T13: Change Parking Minimums to Parking Maximums for New Development, p. 61 https://cob.org/wp-content/uploads/Climate-Task-Force-FINAL-Report-12_2_19.pdf.

¹³ "...review parking standards to reduce the impacts of parking lots on urban form, pedestrian mobility, and the natural environment", p. 10, <https://cob.org/wp-content/uploads/2016-comprehensive-plan.pdf>.

¹⁴ <https://www.whatcomcounty.us/DocumentCenter/View/69472/WC-2021-Climate-Action-Plan---pages>.

¹⁵ [Whatcom Housing Alliance. Parking Policy and Housing Affordability.](#)

¹⁶ [Whatcom Housing Alliance. Parking Policy and Housing Affordability.](#)

Richmond, Raleigh, Toronto, and Edmonton have removed all minimum parking requirements citywide and many have instead adopted parking maximums.¹⁷

WHEREAS, the housing crisis in Whatcom County is unprecedented, leading to a 69% increase in the houseless population from 2012 to 2022, the doubling of the number of families with children experiencing homelessness from February 2020 to February 2021, a 41% increase in average rents over the past five years, and the highest ever homelessness count in 2023.¹⁸

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the Whatcom Democrats call on Whatcom County and the cities of Bellingham, Ferndale, Lynden, and Blaine to immediately remove all minimum parking requirements as an emergency action in response to the housing and climate crises in Whatcom County.

Adopted by a vote of 32-4-4 at the June 24, 2023 meeting of the Whatcom County Democratic Central Committee.

¹⁷ <https://parkingreform.org/resources/mandates-map/>.

¹⁸ <https://www.cascadiadaily.com/news/2023/mar/20/bellinghams-invisible-housing-crisis-homeless-children/>, <https://www.cascadiadaily.com/news/2023/jun/12/homelessness-rising-across-the-board-in-whatcom/>.