

Will less parking mean more housing in Cambridge?

The city is eyeing a controversial proposal to end parking requirements at new buildings in an effort to lower development costs and create more housing.

By [Andrew Brinker](#) Globe Correspondent, Updated September 20, 2022, 6:51 p.m.



A pickup truck was parked at a parking meter on Ames Street in Cambridge. WENDY MAEDA

For decades, it seemed as if urban developers couldn't build enough parking. Now one Boston-area city may say they don't have to build any at all.

An ambitious new policy is moving forward in Cambridge that would end so-called minimum parking requirements for new residential development. Rather than off-street parking spaces being determined by the number of units in a building, developers would be able to build as much, or as little, as they choose. In some cases, that number could be zero.

“We are a city with a very finite amount of space, and land is our most valuable asset,” said Burhan Azeem, the city councilor who proposed the policy. “An obscene amount of that land is dedicated to parking, and that means that it’s harder and more expensive to build housing.”

By letting the market decide how much parking a project needs, Azeem said, the idea is to encourage developers to maximize use of their land. And by dedicating less space to parking — which can sometimes cost more than \$100,000 per space to build — developers could lower their costs and build more units, which could, in theory at least, lead to lower rents.

It is a popular initiative among City Council members, who will have a final vote on the proposal later this year. But the city’s Planning Board last month signaled opposition, echoing the concerns of some residents who fear eliminating the minimum off-street parking requirement will make it even harder to find spots on already-crowded streets.

“People are still going to have their car and they’re going to park in the neighborhood,” Planning Board member Steven Cohen said at a meeting last month. “And suddenly all the neighbors who are already having a hard time parking their cars, well there’s going to be more cars [to contend with].”

“Real people,” he said, “they’re going to be compromised by this. Real people need vehicles.”



A section of Mass Ave in front of Clothware in Cambridge. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

The Planning Board has no formal say in changes to the zoning code, which is decided by the City Council, but its members often vote on proposed amendments anyway, serving as a guidepost of sorts.

Should the measure pass the City Council, Cambridge, which saw its population [swell by 12.6 percent over the last decade](#) to 118,000, according to census data, would join [a growing list of US cities](#) that have [eliminated parking minimums](#) as a way to encourage more housing. Generally, advocates who have spearheaded those efforts argue that the United States has built far too many parking spaces, many of which go largely unused, for the number of cars on the road.

There has been no recent count of parking spaces in Cambridge, though residential developers estimate that 25 percent to 60 percent of their residents use cars, with fewer vehicles in affordable housing developments and buildings closer to the MBTA. Citywide, about two-thirds of residents own cars, according to census data; 33,500 parking permits — which allow residents to park on the street — have been issued this year.

Yet in several parts of the city, developers are still required under the current zoning rules to build one new parking space for each new unit of housing, though they sometimes seek a variance to reduce the mandate.

That means the city is building more parking than there is demand for, said Allan Sadun, cochair of the housing advocacy group [A Better Cambridge](#).

“If we’re ever going to get serious about solving our housing crisis, we’re going to have to build a lot more housing,” Sadun said. “And it is insane to imagine building tens of thousands of new off-street parking spaces with each of those new units. That’s really valuable real estate.”

Paul Ognibene, CEO of development firm Urban Spaces, said he’s found building underground parking for large residential buildings in Cambridge can cost around \$150,000 per space. In the end, he said, those costs translate to higher rents.

Ognibene’s firm is planning to convert a former Catholic school and rectory [into an affordable development with no parking](#) in East Cambridge under a sweeping [affordable housing overlay](#) approved in 2020 that eliminated parking minimums for affordable developments and pared back some density restrictions. He said extending the move to market-rate projects would “do wonders for affordability,” allowing developers to build parking to demand that they gauge with surveys of prospective residents.

“It makes a lot of sense to codify this and let the market work,” he said. “If you need parking as a developer, if your residents want it, then you’ll build it. If you don’t think you need it as a developer, then you won’t build it.”



The Sacred Heart Rectory at 49 6th Street in East Cambridge is the future site of an affordable housing development that will have no parking spaces.DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Housing advocates and developers generally agree that the proposal would lower building costs, though some fear it could put affordable housing developers at a disadvantage.

The affordable housing overlay, said Carl Nagy-Koechlin, executive director of affordable housing developer [Just A Start](#), helped affordable developers compete for hard-to-find sites by effectively allowing them to build more housing for less money. He worried that extending the exemption to market-rate buildings too could, “take the competitive advantage away,” from affordable projects.

Still, he said that he supports the proposal in its broad strokes, and that tweaks to the overlay to give more breaks to affordable developers could offset losses sparked by the proposed zoning changes.

Ultimately, should the City Council move forward and eliminate parking minimums, it would mark the beginning of what advocates hope will be a

broadier reassessment of how to use Cambridge's existing parking, and when it is appropriate to build more.

Iram Farooq, an assistant city manager for community development, said the city is working on a parking study that she hopes will help spark conversations about underutilized parking. [A 2019 report](#) by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council found that 30 percent of the parking spaces in Boston and 20 immediate surrounding cities were empty during peak hours.

And City Councilor Marc McGovern said the conversation about parking minimums is intrinsically linked to Cambridge's climate goals.

"This is not a policy that we're hoping makes fewer people want to have cars. This is really about housing," said McGovern, who proposed the zoning changes with Azeem. "But it does speak to our long-term goals. We need fewer cars on the road, and when we start moving forward policies that provide fewer spaces or discourage car use, we're taking steps toward those goals."

But even in Cambridge, a city known for its progressive politics, that will be a challenge.

"I'm all for more housing," one woman said at the planning board meeting last month. "But not at the expense of our parking spaces."

Andrew Brinker can be reached at andrew.brinker@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter at [@andrewnbrinker](https://twitter.com/andrewnbrinker).