

Councilmembers –

The Community Development Director David Loya has provided a staff report for the February 21, 2024 meeting. (Pages 58-62.) It contains 2-1/2 pages on Parking Policy. The staff report has a variety of omissions which I wish to address here. It also contains misleading information, and the expression of opinions as though they were facts.

It also makes no mention of parking policies associated with the Gateway Area Plan (GAP). The GAP is a part of General Plan. To talk about General Plan policies and omit GAP policies is unfair to the Council's understanding of General Plan parking policies.

The staff report limits itself to its designated area: Parking Standards. But parking does not exist in a vacuum. If car-owners are not able to park in off-street locations, they will park on the street.

There are nine articles on Arcata1.com on the issues related to a reduction of parking. They can be found at arcata1.com/parking-selected-articles

It may be beneficial to the Council to at least skim through these articles.

Reduction of on-street parking

There is a trend in Arcata toward the reduction in on-street parking. If we are to have a transparent discussion this must be taken into consideration. To do otherwise is to pretend that this trend of reduction of on-street parking does not exist.

On-street parking is being reduced as a result of improvements to vehicle circulation – such as the extension of 8th Street and 9th Street as two one-way streets of a couplet. On-street parking is being reduced as a result of improvements to bicycle lanes – as seen on upper H Street and evaluated for K Street. Parking on one side of the length of K Street is proposed on being eliminated. This is significant.

In terms of real numbers, we can look at the block just to the east of the Creamery – the block between 8th and 9th, between K Street and what is now L Street. This block includes the Thom Payne building with Pacific Builders, Barsonti dentistry, and auto repair shops. It is across the street from the side of the Montessori school, the Pub, the car wash site and the storage units. It is down the street from the dance academy.

Because L Street will become a linear park, to be fair in this assessment we won't count any parking lost there. On 8th, 9th, and K Streets there are currently a total of 48 spaces (counting both sides of the street). In the future, with these streets being altered, there will be 11 spaces. That is, 27 spaces will be lost. The remaining spaces amount to 23% of what is there currently.

I'm not saying this is a bad thing. Improvements to make walking and cycling on our city streets better is what we want. But the reduction of on-street parking is a factor that cannot in good consciousness be ignored.

In round numbers, the on-street parking in large areas of the Gateway area will become an estimated 60% of what it is now.

The Gateway Area Plan document had contained images that a person could use to see this reduction in on-street parking places, but this was removed – without any discussion – from the current draft. Version 12a2 from July, 2023, had it – from pages 85 to 102. In the next public version, V14a, from December 2023, it was missing.

I brought up this issue of reduction in on-street parking to the Director, starting at the Open House meeting in January 2022 – over two years ago.

Reduce maximum parking requirements

The staff report discusses policies to “reduce or eliminate minimum parking requirements” on a city-wide basis. It discusses policies to “reduce maximum allowable parking requirements within Infill Opportunity Zones to promote walkable communities.”

First: Reducing maximum allowable parking requirements does not automatically promote walkable communities. In theory, if a parking lot is smaller, a developer can make a building with more housing. The developer can also make private open space for the tenants, or build a commercial space that’s rented to a business (such as a private office) that is not a neighborhood-oriented use. Those options do not contribute to a walkable community.

Second: There is a big, big difference between reducing or eliminating the minimum versus reducing the maximum.

Reducing the minimum or making it be zero – as it is in the Gateway Code – means that the developer doesn’t have to put in parking if the developer doesn’t want to. It frees up developers to do what they want to do. If they think that constructing apartments with no parking and with (hopefully) lowering the rent by, say, \$50 a month will be attractive to tenants, they are welcome to try it.

Reducing the maximum allowable number of parking spaces is a form of social engineering, as Nick Luchessi of Pacific Builders (and others) pointed out in his letter from January 15, 2022 – two years ago, not long after the Gateway Area Plan came out. In that scenario, the City is telling developers what they can and cannot do. Yes, of course, all building codes say what can and cannot be done; this is different. A parking maximum is a pronouncement of what can be built. It does not take into account the developer’s need to create housing that is profitable, based on that developer’s business model.

We saw evidence of this at the Planning Commission hearing on the Westwood Garden Apartments with Steve Strombeck. There are 102 one-bedroom units, and a parking space for every unit. When the Planning Commission requested that the number of parking spaces be reduced, he refused. He told the Commission that he has learned from experience that this does work for him as a landlord. It causes too many problems with the tenants.

Issues with parking maximums as set in the Gateway Area Plan

We also heard evidence of this when the consultant Urban Field Studios presented their site testing analysis of four different theoretical buildings proposed for the Gateway area. The report concluded that it might be difficult for a developer to obtain financing with these reduced maximum number of parking spaces. The lenders are looking for the possibility of problems down the road. The theory is that there may be fewer people who want to rent an apartment that doesn't have enough parking spots for the tenants.

The maximum parking allowed in the Gateway Code is 1 parking space for every 4 units in the Corridor and Hub districts, and 1 parking space for every 2 units in the Barrel and Neighborhood Districts. That is, a building that has 44 units, such as Sorrel Place, would have a maximum of 11 parking spaces. (The Gateway Code does not specify this, but we'd like to assume that ADA spaces are in addition to this maximum number of spaces. This is not currently clear.)

A five-story building with 120 one-bedroom apartments of, say, 425 square feet, would have a maximum of 30 parking spaces. If the building was built with one, two, and three-bedroom units and had 60 units, it could have a maximum of 15 parking spaces.

A building with 24 two-bedroom units – that is, potentially 48 adult driving-age tenants – would have a minimum of zero parking spaces... and a maximum of 6. That is, there would be 1 parking space for every 8 tenants.

To summarize:

With a parking minimum, developers can do what they want. If they want zero parking, they can have zero parking.

With a parking maximum, developers cannot do what they want. If their business model tells them that their tenants want parking, then their choices include not building in Arcata, building in McKinleyville, etc.

My concern with parking maximums that are below what developers want is just that: The developers simply will not build here.

How does the business community see this?

The recommendations from the Economic Development Committee somehow got “lost in the shuffle” on this issue. Their recommendations from August 2, 2022, never made it into the General Plan. (See the article and the Committee's video on Arcata1.com.)

The General Plan policies are calling for a reduction in parking overall. In the Gateway Area Plan, a developer can build a commercial space with zero off-street parking. If a developer wants to provide no parking for the commercial tenants, the Gateway Code allows that.

But very oppressive is the parking MAXIMUM. Suppose a developer wants to put in a commercial space for a small restaurant on the ground floor of a new building. A 1,000 square foot space might have 35 or 40 diners and required a staff of 5 or 6 people.

By the Gateway Code, the MAXIMUM number of off-street parking spaces that this commercial use could have is ONE parking space.

This brings up the questions: Who would want to rent this space to create a restaurant? And – Would the developer want to build this space, knowing that it might be difficult to rent?

The argument is made that when you go to eat or shop at a downtown restaurant or store, you don't have the expectation that you can park nearby. When the very beautiful Stillman building was built, 20 years ago, on the corner of H and 9th on the Plaza, it was not required to have parking for its commercial tenants. For downtown, that is normal.

For areas away from downtown, will this be the "new normal" – no parking? Can you imagine going to The Pub if there were no parking? And keep in mind that street parking in that neighborhood will be less than half of what it is now.

What did the Economic Development Committee say?

These are the words from the Economic Development Committee:

Must ensure that sufficient parking provided for both residents and visitors to and employees of local businesses, given rural nature of area and to ensure that parking doesn't infringe on nearby/local residential neighborhoods.

Don't presume that students, staff, or residents don't have cars needing to be parked somewhere. 80% of current students are non-local.

Here's what was included in the General Plan, originally:

Ensure adequate parking for local businesses and employees.

Here's what's in the draft General Plan now on this:

Nothing. It was eliminated.

Whether a person owns a car is a separate discussion from whether that person walks or rides a bike.

Promoting walking and biking is good. Creating a walkable, community-oriented neighborhood is great. We all agree.

In my view, it is a big mistake to believe that a person who enjoys walking and biking – and perhaps even walks and bikes to work, to the food store, and to the gym, etc. – does not also own a car.

You can look at a sampling of any number of Arcatans. Ask the members of the Planning Commission or the Transportation Safety Committee: Do you own a car? Ask the most avid promoter of bicycling: Is there a car in your family or housing unit?

This has been gone over a hundred times. Certainly there are parents who take their little kid or kids to school with a bike. And with electric bikes this is more feasible. But if the parent has a job with set hours; if there are two kids that go to different schools; if there are after-school activities at different hours, etc etc – what is a parent to do? Operating without a car is not a practical alternative.

Reduced parking at Sorrel Place is not a good example

The staff report mentions Sorrel Place as an example of reduced parking. There are 44 units, and “the project was permitted with 14 on-site parking places.” It was permitted with 14 parking spots plus 4 ADA spots – a total of 18. What was actually built was 10 regular parking spots plus 2 ADA places – a total of 12, even fewer than what was intended.

The staff report says “there is still available parking at all hours of the day in this neighborhood.” I don’t consider Sorrel Place to be the equivalent of where development may occur in other areas of Arcata – particularly not equivalent to development in the Gateway area.

The block where Sorrel Place is located – between 7th and 6th Streets, between I and J Streets – is a “light use” parking area. There are businesses that are open only during the daytime hours, apartments with off-street parking, a PG&E sub-station (no parking needs), and other structures that have light parking needs.

If the same building were, say, in Northtown or on Wisteria Way or in the Sunset neighborhood – then there’d be an entirely different impact.

A less-spoken of issue with Sorrel Place

Having a reduced maximum for parking makes for smaller parking lots and fewer spaces for each tenant. There's another effect connected with this that isn't much talked about.

People repair their cars in the street. Lacking a regular parking spot, car owners will do their repairs where they can. Typically in the streets surrounding Sorrel Place, there's a vehicle up on jacks being repaired. (There is one currently.)

There's also been an increase in semi-abandoned cars, including a motorhome that someone may not be living in. (Not known.)

In addition, there's been an increase in dilapidated/dead cars. Cars with no engines, smashed windshields, no wheels, dead motorcycles, etc.

These worked-on and abandoned vehicles take up parking spots, are an eyesore, and -- probably most importantly -- leak oil into the streets and storm-drains that ends up in the creek. The amount of oil coming off of these projects is substantial.

To a certain extent, what we are seeing is part of the low-income aspect of Sorrel Place. But to another extent it is directly due to not having parking spaces for the tenants for their own cars.

Reduction in parking is ageist and discriminatory

This also has been brought up before. There's a large section of the population who are not as fit as they once were. Again, it is one thing to ride a bike or walk for recreational purposes, and a different thing to carry groceries, visit a friend after dark, go to a doctor's appointment in Eureka, and on and on and on.

There are many people who are not handicapped but the still rely on a car to get around.

To reiterate: Even if a person uses a car just once a month, that person still wants to own a car. And that car will need to be parked somewhere.

Ride-share cars and self-driving taxis may save us

Ride-share short-term rental cars -- such as ZipCars -- provide a real solution. The more that the City can promote ride-share short-term rental cars, in my view, the better off we'll be. Paying for the use of a ZipCar includes gas, insurance, maintenance, and of course the cost of ownership. The out-of-pocket cost of around \$10/hour for using a ZipCar may seem expensive to the uninitiated, but a calculation of the true costs of owning a car shows that using a ZipCar as a primary vehicle may make economic sense.

In Philadelphia, ZipCars are all over the place, available for hourly rentals in city-owned parking lots scattered around. In the downtown, the ZipCar parking lots are walking distance apart. In other areas, they are walking distance to bus or subway stops. I looked into renting a full-size van for a few hours to take a group of friends to a restaurant, and considered getting a car for myself for a visit to the suburbs.

They are somewhat more expensive than a standard rental (Avis, Budget, Enterprise) but far more convenient.

In Philadelphia the city employees get a monthly ZipCar stipend, as to students at different colleges. The idea is to have fewer cars off the streets – and especially to keep privately-owned cars out of downtown parking lots.

The policy on promoting vehicle share facilities is CM-1b, shown at the bottom of page 59.

It would be my dream to get grant funding for a good-size ZipCar start-up for Arcata. There's a which-comes-first aspect to it: There have to be enough cars so that cars are available and the place you go to pick them up is easy to get to. Having a pilot program with just four or six cars doesn't teach us anything. There have to be enough quantity that of available cars so that the word gets around about how they work. I figure if there were 200 cars located in a dozen parking lots around Arcata, then people might recognize their usefulness and value.

Assorted notes

1. If there is a zero minimum on parking and tenants do not have a place to park -- where and how will they charge their future electric cars? Will there be a single charger for, say, a dozen apartments, with time meters so that everyone has to share?
2. Paragraph 2 on page 59 says: "Permit vertical and/or horizontal mixed-use development close to clusters of activity and at major transportation crossroads...."

The Community Development Director should tell the Council what "vertical and/or horizontal mixed-use development" means.

Horizontal means that there can be a row of common-wall houses (attached townhouses) such as are seen in cities, and there can be a neighborhood commercial use right there among the residences.

Vertical means that the neighborhood commercial usage is on the first floor, and the residential usage is on a 2nd floor, above.

3. Policy CM-2a (upper page 60) says "Infill, redevelopment, and reuse of underutilized property at higher densities shall be encouraged **prior to outward expansion of City boundaries.**"

The City of Arcata is not engaged in outward expansion of our boundaries. Infill, redevelopment, and reuse of underutilized property at higher densities shall be encouraged – period. There is no "prior to outward expansion."

4. The staff report says:
Provide negative incentives, such as parking meters, permit parking, time limited parking,

carpool incentives, and other targeted parking measures that encourage alternative modes utilizing “induced demand” strategies.

“Induced demand” is a phrase from Economics. It means that as supply increases, more people will arrive to take advantage of the increased supply – and very quickly there will no longer be an increased supply.

In traffic studies, “induced demand” refers to how if roadways are expanded, lanes added, etc., to accommodate higher volumes of traffic, there will quickly be more drivers who show up to fill un-clogged roadways, and very soon the road will be clogged again.

I believe the Director is using this phrase incorrectly. I think what he means is that as it becomes more difficult or costly to park, then fewer people will come to those areas to look for a parking spot. This would be “reduced demand.”

As an important aside, the concept of “induced demand” comes up when we look at the supply of housing in Arcata. When new housing is built, will that mean that there will be more available housing? Based on “induced demand” – the answer is No. When new housing is built, for a short time there will be available housing. Very quickly people will arrive – people who previously felt that there was a housing shortage in Arcata. And very quickly the increased number of people looking for housing will outweigh the number of housing units available.

5. Policy CM-2a, item 3. Page 60

“Integrate transit stop facilities into public and private projects.”

Unfortunately there is nothing that incentivizes a developer to do this.

6. Page 61, middle of the page.

“Changing the standards to lower the maximum parking required, eliminate or reduce the minimum parking required, and encourage new infrastructure development to support alternative transportation is **a net positive for commuters regardless of their preferred mode of travel.**”

This is an entirely subjective statement. There is no factual basis to this statement.

That lowering the maximum parking requirement and/or eliminating the minimum parking creates a net positive for all commuters **regardless of their preferred mode of travel** is a ridiculous statement.

It will be net positive for those commuters who use public transit.

It will not be net positive for car commuters – unless you want to expand the definition of “net positive” to mean that it’s good for the community.
