

ZONING PRACTICE

JUNE 2017

AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION



➞ ISSUE NUMBER 6

PRACTICE PARKING REFORM



6

Eliminating Parking Minimums

By Ben LeRoy

For decades, many American planners unquestioningly applied minimum off-street parking requirements to projects of every conceivable size, type, and context.

Whether drawn from the quasi-scientific findings of the Institute of Transportation Engineers' *Parking Generation* report or simply borrowed whole cloth from other cities' zoning codes, minimum parking requirements continued to grow more onerous and complex. Communities across the nation watched as formerly walkable neighborhoods were hollowed out by parking. Even as planners crafted complete streets policies and rejiggered tax incentives for infill redevelopment, minimum parking requirements were largely ignored, taken on faith as a necessity for any well-planned city.

But many planners have woken up. A wealth of data-oriented research—from *Parking Reform Made Easy* by Richard Willson, FAICP, to the work of Chuck Marohn, AICP's Strong Towns organization, to the seminal *The High Cost of Free Parking* by Donald Shoup, FAICP—has produced a growing consensus within the planning profession that the traditional approach to requiring automobile parking produces more harm than good. In response, cities and counties have begun chipping away at their parking requirements with a variety of techniques, offering urban-minded developers the opportunity to reduce their parking burden through shared parking, payments in lieu of parking, and smarter management of the public parking supply.

While these incremental steps have generally proven popular with developers, relatively few communities have taken the bolder step of eliminating parking requirements in part or in full. The following sections lay out the case for parking reform, profile recent reform efforts in three cities, and present a series of strategies to help planners make the case for eliminating off-street parking requirements to residents and elected officials.

THE CASE FOR PARKING REFORM

The case for parking reform is not self-evident in our auto-dominated society, especially to

those not trained as urban planners. Residents and business owners alike have legitimate concerns about ever-increasing congestion levels. Accordingly, a discussion of *how* to achieve parking reform would be lacking if it did not include a summary of the top reasons *why* parking reform is a worthwhile goal. Although parking requirements are well-intentioned, they raise housing prices, induce automobile traffic, and degrade the built environment.

Increased Housing Prices

Because Americans often park for free, they could be forgiven for thinking that parking is free to build and maintain. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. It turns out that parking—and more specifically, parking produced as a result of minimum parking requirements—is a significant contributor to unaffordable housing.

The construction of parking carries substantial costs. Surface parking consumes

valuable land that could otherwise be used for productive buildings, while structured parking costs average nearly \$19,000 per space (Cudney 2016). With parking requirements elevating parking supplies beyond what the market would normally produce, parkers often do not directly cover the cost of their own parking. Instead, the cost of parking is tucked into rent, hiding the true allocation of the burden. Non-parkers often end up subsidizing parkers, producing a more expensive and less fair result than allowing developers to build only as much parking as parkers are willing to pay for.

Induced Automobile Traffic

Intended to mitigate congestion, minimum parking requirements have unfortunately produced the opposite effect. By hiding the true cost of automobile ownership and spreading out destinations, minimum parking requirements create the very traffic burden they were created to contain. A recent analysis by the



Ben LeRoy



In dense urban areas with high land values, many developers choose to build parking at surface level and elevate the building on stilts. The effect at street level is unpleasant, especially for pedestrians.

State Smart Transportation Initiative and the University of Connecticut found substantial association between increases in a city's parking supply and subsequent increases in car commuting (McCahill 2016). Planners are unable to conduct a controlled experiment to test this phenomenon in the real world, but a wealth of evidence suggests that the relief that parking requirements supposedly buy from traffic congestion is temporary at best.

A Degraded Built Environment

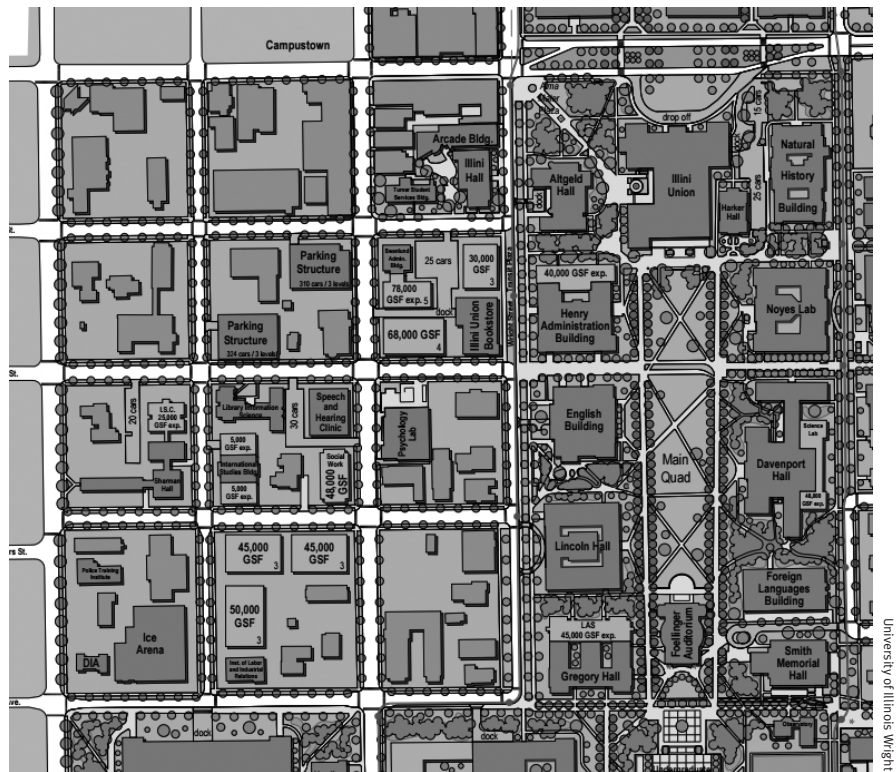
Ask the residents of your community whether they would prefer to spend their time in the city's most walkable district or its largest parking lot, and you will hear nearly unanimous acclaim for the former (a few people are born contrarians). Julie Campoli's excellent *Made for Walking* examines 12 unusually walkable neighborhoods across North America. While these neighborhoods vary in many respects, they share the theme of possessing a limited and carefully managed parking supply. As the author notes, "Rather than feeding auto-dependency, smarter parking policies help initiate a cycle of urban pedestrianism. . . . Replacing surface lots and street-level garages with homes or businesses improves the quality of the street and encourages trips by bike or on foot."

PARKING REFORM IN PRACTICE

While many cities have eliminated nonresidential minimum off-street parking requirements in their central business districts, very few have removed parking minimums entirely. For communities contemplating more dramatic reform, the cities of Champaign, Illinois; Fayetteville, Arkansas; and Buffalo, New York, illustrate three distinct models.

Champaign, Illinois

The college town of Champaign, Illinois, has seen substantial reinvestment in its core neighborhoods over the past 15 years. Spurred on by growing enrollment at the University of Illinois, local developers have engaged in a building boom in the high-density residential neighborhood (known as the University District) adjacent to campus. At the same time, a greater number of all sorts of residents—graduate students, young professionals, empty nesters, and even families—have driven a smaller boom in Champaign's vibrant downtown. With space at a premium and walkability in high demand, developers have frequently



University of Illinois Wright



The University of Illinois *Campus Master Plan* shows several potential future buildings (denoted by lighter coloration and anticipated GSF), some of which are sited on existing private land that the University does not currently own.

sought (and been granted) relief from the generally applicable parking requirements.

Over the same period, Champaign's policy makers have recognized a change in community attitudes toward transportation. Between 2000 and 2012, nearly a dozen text amendments reduced parking requirements for particular land uses or overlay zones. The *Champaign Tomorrow* comprehensive plan, adopted in 2011, acknowledges the importance of balancing the parking supply against other transportation and urban design concerns to enhance walkability in core neighborhoods. With a comprehensive update to the zoning ordinance following on the heels of *Champaign Tomorrow* and Champaign's minimum parking requirements experiencing death by a thousand cuts, the city's planning staff began to consider the possibility of taking a bold step: eliminating parking requirements in the core neighborhoods of the community.

A quirk of geography and demography made Champaign's University District an at-

tractive test case. Surrounded by railroad tracks to the east, a busy arterial street to the north, and the University of Illinois campus to the east and south, the University District is almost an island of student housing. These barriers largely prevent the commingling of student housing with nearby neighborhoods composed of home owners, a typical source of NIMBY sentiment in many college towns. Furthermore, the University District's robust transit network, its proximity to campus, and the lack of on-campus student parking combined to keep daily driving demand among the University District's (mostly student) residents at a minimum. Extensive interviews of University District landlords confirmed staff observations that the residential parking supply was experiencing a vacancy rate of approximately 30 percent. At study sessions with the plan commission and city council, elected and appointed officials expressed their openness to further reductions in parking requirements. With no opposition arising from home owners (who were indifferent) or the development

community (which was eager for parking reform), Champaign staff anticipated smooth passage of a proposal to eliminate all parking requirements within the University District.

However, the proposal hit an unexpected speed bump at the plan commission meeting. The University of Illinois sent a representative to the meeting to register the university's opposition. Citing the university's master plan, the university's director of real estate planning and services expressed concern over the impact the proposal would have on privately held surface parking lots adjacent to campus: "Once this law is eliminated those parking lots will become the hottest commodity in Champaign County for high-density development. It turns out that some of those that are preserved right now for parking for the private sector are locations where we have proposed future academic buildings" (Champaign 2015). The commission was unmoved by this line of dissent, but nevertheless continued the hearing to another date. At that meeting, the university abandoned its original argument, suggesting instead that a tightening of the residential parking supply could lead to overflow and enforcement impacts on the university's parking supply. Staff countered, noting that the university's parking supply is largely controlled by a combination of meters and permits, making it highly unlikely that University District residents would try to use university parking as long-term parking.

Ultimately, both the planning commission and city council approved the proposal, and in October 2015 Champaign eliminated parking requirements within the University District. As predicted, a number of student housing developments submitted permit applications shortly afterwards, as developers were waiting to make use of the lower parking requirements. These developments all provide parking at different rates, but none of them provides as much parking as was previously required. As the Fall 2017 semester approaches, these developments will be opening their doors for the first time. Others are in the pipeline right now. In the meantime, the city expanded parking reform to the nearby Midtown and Downtown areas, eliminating parking requirements in core areas that serve a much less student-oriented population. It is possible—even likely—that some of the developments built in the wake of this reform will find that they have underbuilt or overbuilt their parking supply, and the city plans to



Andrew Garner, City of Fayetteville



The second floor of Fayetteville's Nelson's Crossing Shopping Center sat vacant for years as it was "underparked" according to the city's parking requirements table. Once nonresidential parking requirements were repealed, businesses could occupy the second floor, improving the development's financial productivity.

monitor private parking demand and pricing over the coming years. Staff anticipates that the findings will show that any concerns were largely unfounded: The market will value parking appropriately for the first time in decades, and Champaign's core neighborhoods will continue to mature into more walkable areas as the effects of a one-size-fits-all parking policy begin to fade.

Fayetteville, Arkansas

Fayetteville, Arkansas, is similar to Champaign, Illinois, in many ways. Both are college towns with approximately 80,000 residents. Both host a flagship state university. Both recognized a problem with their existing parking regulations. While Champaign has eliminated all parking minimums in select areas, in 2015 Fayetteville eliminated all nonresidential parking requirements citywide, leaving parking requirements for residential uses in place.

As in Champaign, Fayetteville's parking reform efforts were built on the foundation of a comprehensive plan commitment to reducing automobile dependence. The *Fayetteville Downtown Master Plan* expanded on this idea, recommending a "Smart Parking" approach including the adoption of shared parking standards and revised minimum parking requirements. But change began slowly. While the city amended its downtown parking regulations to allow changes in land use without the provision of new parking, new construction and building expansion still triggered the standard parking requirements. A separate

amendment allowed bike parking spaces to be substituted for automobile parking spaces. Nevertheless, most projects in downtown Fayetteville (and everywhere else) were still subject to minimum parking requirements.

The impetus to completely eliminate nonresidential parking requirements came from the community's commercial real estate brokers. Planning staff noted the frustration many brokers expressed in trying to fill vacant commercial spaces with new uses required to provide more parking than the original use. This issue was not limited to downtown, but extended even into the city's most automobile-oriented districts. Noting the constraining effect parking requirements were having on the local economy, staff proposed cutting all nonresidential parking requirements.

To the surprise of many, the adoption of such sweeping parking reform went relatively smoothly. Fayetteville's planning director, Andrew Garner, AICP, recounts that staff framed the proposal to tick many boxes for both liberal and conservative community members and elected officials. Parking reform in Fayetteville found bipartisan support in its projected sustainability improvements, reduced burden on small business owners, and individual property rights. While some mild opposition arose, enthusiastic support from several planning commissioners assured passage. Tracy Hoskins, a businessman and developer who sits on the planning commission, acknowledged that while the parking reform experiment might create a few negative



VIEW FROM ACROSS THE STREET

Andrew Garner, City of Fayetteville



The proposed Lumiere Theatre in downtown Fayetteville would not provide any parking of its own, relying instead on the private and public supply on surrounding streets and lots.

impacts, “the question is does this cure more problems than it creates? And absolutely, it does” (Gill 2015).

As Fayetteville’s parking reform approaches its second anniversary, Garner reports that results have been as expected so far. In more auto-oriented districts, businesses continue to provide ample parking. Some sites exceed the old minimum requirements, while others have made use of the increased flexibility to fill spaces previously kept vacant due to code requirements. Meanwhile, downtown Fayetteville is making room for a pair of theater projects that planners anticipate will make the area even more vibrant. One of the theaters proposes no parking at all, while the other (which includes a small number of on-site dwelling units) proposes a small lot for staff and residents. No matter the location, Fayetteville businesses are now free to provide as much—or as little—parking as they need to become successful contributors to the community.

Buffalo, New York

Parking reform in Champaign and Fayetteville may seem like a leap to planners in communities still nipping and tucking their parking codes, but their partial parking repeals are downright modest compared to Buffalo, New York. That city closed out 2016 by adopting a

sweeping new unified development ordinance that, among other things, eliminated parking requirements almost universally.

Having grown to over 550,000 residents before World War II, Buffalo has spent the last several decades shrinking to approximately half its peak population. Buffalo’s population decline has been accompanied by a hollowing out of its many prewar neighborhoods by parking lots. As one civic booster quipped about downtown Buffalo in 2003, “If you look very closely, there are still some buildings that are standing in the way of parking progress” (Shoup 2005).

Not content to idly watch the city continue to slide, the city’s strategic planning office launched the Buffalo Green Code planning effort in April 2010. This project stripped the city’s existing unified development ordinance down to the studs, replacing its standard use-based zoning with a form-based code, retooling street design standards, and severely curtailing parking requirements. As one project consultant put it, the Green Code represents “a radical reimagining of how they were going to do every facet of the development controls in the city of Buffalo” (Strungys 2017).

The sheer scope of the Green Code project necessitated an extremely robust public input process, with over 240 community meetings attracting over 6,500 participants. With every element of the development control

process up for review, parking received substantial emphasis during these meetings but did not lead the agenda. As project manager John Fell, AICP, recalls, “parking was probably a top five important issue to the public,” but people were equally or more concerned with building height and materials, site design, and the redevelopment of large vacant institutional sites. The project also recruited a citizen advisory committee, composed of representatives from every city neighborhood, to both act as a sounding board and recruit neighbors to public meetings.

The input process gave the planning team opportunities to urge concerned residents to consider a more comprehensive transportation demand management (TDM) approach to congestion, rather than clinging to an outdated system of parking requirements that had only managed to degrade the urban environment while doing little to mitigate congestion. Under the new code, projects consisting of (a) 5,000 square feet of new construction or (b) 50,000 square feet of a renovation involving a change of use must prepare a TDM plan. While each project must accommodate the travel demand it generates, developers may employ a host of demand management tools ranging from bicycle parking to subsidized transit passes to alternative work schedules.

The full impact of Buffalo’s parking reform will not be felt for several years, but things are already starting to change. Staff members report fielding interest from a few developers in adding dwelling units without additional parking to small projects already under way. Though many of Buffalo’s walkable neighborhoods currently bear the scars of required parking lots, look for these areas to mature and thrive as the city’s residents rediscover the value of urban-style developments in their urban neighborhoods.

STRATEGIES FOR SELLING PARKING REFORM

The context for parking reform in each of the preceding examples was unique, as it is for every community. The elected officials and citizens in these cities may have shared a willingness to listen, learn, and experiment with parking reform in a way that other communities are not quite ready for. Nevertheless, some of the strategies employed are transferable to municipalities of every type and size. Consider trying the following strategies when pursuing parking reform in your community.

DEVELOPMENT “A”



1 CURB CUT
60% OF STREET FRONTAGE OCCUPIED BY GROUND-LEVEL USES
PARKING COMPLETELY SCREENED

DEVELOPMENT “B”



2 CURB CUTS
17% OF STREET FRONTAGE OCCUPIED BY GROUND-LEVEL USES
UNSCREENED PARKING ON AT LEAST ONE LEVEL

Tim Kirkby



Two projects, one profit margin: A developer expects the same return from either building, but the one granted parking flexibility presents a much more welcoming face to the street.

Employ Scenarios and Alternatives

Parking requirements have been the law of the land for so long that many people have trouble envisioning how a newly constructed building with little or no parking might function in their city. The local development community can show the impact of parking requirements on both the design and finances of a proposed project.

In Champaign, architect Tim Kirkby, AICP, demonstrated to the plan commission how one of his projects would change if parking requirements were eliminated (Champaign 2015). Kirkby presented two alternatives side by side. While both alternatives projected an expected return of 7.5 percent, their form and finances differed dramatically. The “required parking” alternative was two stories taller than the “flexible parking” alternative, and was largely lifted up on stilts to accommodate ground-floor parking. In contrast, the “flexible parking” alternative had one fewer curb cut and presented ground-level dwelling units facing the street. Perhaps more compelling was the financial comparison of the two buildings. The cost of building required parking was projected to increase rents by approximately 33 percent! This real-life example of a building that would be made both more attractive and more affordable was very compelling evidence of the wisdom of eliminating parking requirements in the University District.

The development community is already a natural ally of any planner seeking to ease

parking requirements, although care must be taken to avoid stirring up legitimate concerns that parking reform is simply a giveaway of the city’s regulatory power to enhance the private sector’s bottom line. Asking developers to compare “required” and “flexible” parking alternatives that project the same profit margin can mitigate these concerns.

Put the Focus on Residents, Not Drivers

Many parking reform efforts are stalled by neighboring residents and businesses sounding the alarm about parking congestion. Even if these concerns are overblown (as they are in many cases), parking congestion proves to be a difficult ground on which to do battle. Instead, consider shifting the conversation to the positive impact that parking reform has on the wallets of residents.

As discussed above, overly burdensome parking requirements raise the cost of construction and building maintenance. These costs are tucked into the rent and purchase price of building, needlessly raising the price on every activity conducted within those buildings. Invite concerned neighbors and elected officials to speculate on what it could mean for the city coffers if residents, no longer tied up by unnecessary parking costs, found themselves with a greater disposable income.

A common rejoinder to this argument raises the specter that developers will simply keep rents the same and pocket the cost savings as extra profit. Fortunately, a couple of

rebuttals address this line of attack. First, in a competitive housing market tenants will generally select the housing option with greater amenities (including parking) if rent is the same, providing a strong economic incentive for landlords with less parking to lower their rents to remain competitive. Additionally, even if prices do not drop for some reason, it is hard to argue in favor of forcing tenants to waste money on unused parking simply to spite developers and reduce their profits.

Fairness arguments can be very powerful in these situations. Is it good city policy to make people pay for parking they don’t use? Depending on the community, appealing to housing affordability can be a powerful argument.

Substitute Local Examples for National Studies

The field of parking policy research has produced extensive data about nearly every aspect of parking, from vacancy rates to supply/demand models to land consumption. Unfortunately, these studies may be of limited use in front of elected officials disinclined to look to national trends for local decisions. Instead, generate your own local data and examples to create a compelling narrative that parking reform is a unique solution for your unique city’s unique problems.

In Fayetteville, planners could point to buildings in otherwise busy commercial districts that were being left vacant due to excessive parking requirements. In Buffalo, staff successfully argued that residential parking requirements were excessive in a community where 30 percent of households did not own a single car. In Champaign, questionnaires sent to landlords revealed that most apartment buildings had parking occupancy rates of only 60 to 80 percent, even at reduced rental rates. These findings mirrored numbers from the city’s own public parking permits in the area, which had cut rates in an attempt to preserve the 70 percent occupancy rate. In all these cases, the local story told the tale of why parking reform was important.

Remember, too, that the story does not end upon the successful adoption of new parking regulations. As the built environment changes over the years, consider tracking building permits to see how much parking developers are providing. In Champaign, staff projected that most future buildings would likely provide parking at 50 to 75 percent of

the rate formerly required, promising to return to the plan commission with an update in a few years. One and a half years later, this projection has been borne out by the building permits received for review. Tracking data both before and after adoption of parking reform reassures elected officials that they can always change the rules back if an unforeseen negative trend arises.

SHARING THE STORY

Perhaps your community will be the next to make waves in the planning world by adopting sweeping parking reforms. Or perhaps your community is still testing the waters with incremental tweaks to the system. Whatever position you find yourself in, remember to share the story with the world! Parking reform is still a relatively nascent movement, and practitioners around the country benefit from seeing what their colleagues in other cities and states have accomplished.

Strong Towns maintains a user-updated map of communities that have or are consid-

ering reducing their parking requirements. Visit this site to gain ideas for your community, and update the map once you have made progress toward your goals. The planning trade press is also very receptive to stories about parking reform.

Don't hesitate to contact publications like *Planning* magazine, *Streetsblog*, *CityLab*, or your favorite planning blog. You may be surprised at their willingness to shine a spotlight on your unique efforts.

Finally, consider submitting a session proposal to a conference. Parking sessions are often standing room only at APA conferences, but other connected professional organizations such as the International City/County Management Association, the American Public Works Association, and the Government Finance Officers Association can benefit from learning about parking reform as well.

It is an exciting time to be working in the field of parking reform. Most cities employed the same parking policy playbook

Explore the Strong Towns parking reform map (strongtowns.org/parking) to see how communities around the country are updating their parking requirements.

through much of the 20th century, but cities are beginning to experiment with individualized solutions.

No single parking policy will be the right choice for every city, but the examples recounted in this article may provide a road map for your community to rethink how parking fits in with other planning goals.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ben LeRoy is an associate planner for Champaign, Illinois, and a 2013 graduate of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His master's capstone analyzed the impacts of minimum parking requirements on the city's rental housing supply. He has also drafted new infill-friendly zoning districts in the city's core neighborhoods and rewritten the planned development ordinance.

Cover: 1343024/Pixabay.com, CCo

Vol. 34, No. 6

Zoning Practice is a monthly publication of the American Planning Association. Subscriptions are available for \$95 (U.S.) and \$120 (foreign). James M. Drinan, JD, Chief Executive Officer; David Rouse, FAICP, Managing Director of Research and Advisory Services. **Zoning Practice** (ISSN 1548-0135) is produced at APA. Joseph DeAngelis and David Morley, AICP, Editors; Julie Von Bergen, Senior Editor.

Missing and damaged print issues: Contact Customer Service, American Planning Association, 205 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1200, Chicago, IL 60601 (312-431-9100 or subscriptions@planning.org) within 90 days of the publication date. Include the name of the publication, year, volume and issue number or month, and your name, mailing address, and membership number if applicable.

Copyright ©2017 by the American Planning Association, 205 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1200, Chicago, IL 60601-5927. The American Planning Association also has offices at 1030 15th St., NW, Suite 750 West, Washington, DC 20005-1503; planning.org.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the American Planning Association.

Printed on recycled paper, including 50-70% recycled fiber and 10% postconsumer waste.

REFERENCES

- Campoli, Julie. 2012. *Made for Walking: Density and Neighborhood Form*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. Available at tinyurl.com/k3557tq.
- Champaign (Illinois), City of. 2015. "Champaign Plan Commission Meeting, May 9." Available at tinyurl.com/mwygock.
- Cudney, Gary. 2016. *Parking Structure Cost Outlook for 2016*. Available at tinyurl.com/khqo8am.
- Gill, Todd. "Fayetteville considers eliminating minimum parking standards." *Fayetteville Flyer*, August 10, 2015. Available at tinyurl.com/mwey2l3.
- McCahill, Christopher T., Norman Garrick, Carol Atkinson-Palombo, and Adam Polinski. 2016. "Effects of Parking Provision on Automobile Use in Cities." *Transportation Research Record*, 2543: 159-165. Available at tinyurl.com/mpx65od.
- Shoup, Donald C. 2005. *The High Cost of Free Parking*. Chicago: American Planning Association. Available at planning.org/publications/book/9026730.
- Strungys, Arista. 2017. Telephone interview with author, February 6.

ZONING PRACTICE
AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION

205 N. Michigan Ave.
Suite 1200
Chicago, IL 60601-592



DOES YOUR ZONING STILL
REQUIRE OFF-STREET
PARKING?

6