Eliminating Parking Mandates:
More housing, more businesses at lower cost, and still, plenty of parking.

What are parking mandates?
Today, properties must include a certain amount of off-street car parking as defined by a local government’s minimum parking mandates. These mandates are typically expressed as the number of parking spaces per home or per square foot of office, retail, or other commercial space. The minimums are designed to exceed parking demand, so there are always empty spaces.

What’s the problem?
Parking mandates are preventing Colorado from achieving its housing, climate, and economic goals by driving up the cost of housing, increasing vehicle ownership and transportation emissions, encouraging sprawl, preventing walkability, hindering economic development, and penalizing those who cannot afford to own a car.

Vehicle parking mandates assume that everyone is driving and ensure that our homes, businesses, and communities are designed primarily for cars. Over the long term, this shapes how we build our communities, pushing destinations further apart as they’re separated by more and more parking and making it more difficult to do anything other than drive.

Most cities in the U.S. dedicate more space to car storage than housing, resulting in roughly eight parking spaces for every car and taking up about 30% of space in our cities.

Parking mandates increase housing costs and limit new supply, exacerbating Colorado’s housing crisis.

- There is no such thing as free parking, and building a single parking space typically costs between $9,000 and $50,000. To recover those costs, builders incorporate them into the price of goods, services, and housing – increasing average rents by $225 per month and contributing to Colorado’s ranking as the 6th most expensive housing market in the U.S.
- For affordable housing projects, where monthly rents are capped as a share of income, excessive parking mandates mean projects sacrifice new affordable housing for parking. At $35,000 per structured parking space, developers could build 1 affordable home for the cost of 8 new spaces.
- Rental and low-income households often pay for parking that they don’t need or want. For example, 53% of low-income households near transit don’t own a vehicle, yet most municipalities mandate 1.5 to 2.5 parking spaces per unit.
Parking mandates create an oversupply of parking.

- Parking mandates are usually based on national data that is outdated and not context-specific, which frequently leads to more parking than is necessary.
- According to an RTD study of parking use in housing near transit stations, 41% of parking spaces in market-rate housing and 50% of parking spaces in affordable housing go unused during peak periods, indicating that local mandates force developers to build more parking than people want at the expense of the housing they need. Across the 86 housing properties, 9,602 parking spaces sit empty, adding up to $270 million in wasted spending.

Example of housing projects that were negatively impacted by parking mandates in Colorado:

- The Ridge at Thornton Station, a 280-unit, market-rate housing project, would’ve included 100 more homes had it been allowed to match supply with demand instead of overbuilding their parking to meet local mandates that are some of the highest in the region.
The Caraway, a 116-unit affordable housing project in Adams County, sacrificed 44 homes because of excessive local parking mandates that forced the developer to dedicate land to parking instead of housing.

Williams Pointe in Lakewood, a 44-unit, 71-parking space, 100% affordable multifamily housing project, was denied the opportunity to lower its parking supply by 20%, as allowed by code for affordable housing, adding a $1 million parking garage to the project costs.

University Station Apartments in Denver includes 60 homes for seniors but could have included 60 more homes had the developer been allowed to rely on evidence from comparable properties to determine their parking supply instead of arbitrary local mandates.

Harvest Hill, a 152-unit family-oriented affordable housing project in Broomfield that is blocks away from a bus rapid transit station, was required by code to provide 298 parking spaces despite a parking study that estimated 116 spaces would be sufficient. After a 1.5-year process, the City ultimately allowed 228 spaces, still nearly double the need. Lack of space for additional off-street parking prevented at least another 30 affordable homes from being built.

More parking means less housing. (Sightline Institute, 2023)

Parking mandates hinder opportunities for economic development.

- Parking mandates affect businesses too, causing excess parking and limiting development on commercial Main Streets that should support casual and convenient shopping on foot. They particularly harm local businesses on small parcels where having to provide even a few parking spaces can make opening their business impossible. They also limit businesses’ flexibility to expand or use their land for other needs, such as patio seating.
- For shopping centers, parking mandates increase project costs by 93%, negatively affecting investors, developers, and business owners. Removing these mandates not only saves money but also gives businesses the flexibility to reduce parking demand through shared parking arrangements and investments in more efficient transportation.
- Studies show that business owners often drastically overestimate the share of customers arriving by car and that pedestrians and cyclists typically spend more and shop more frequently at local businesses than those who arrive by car.
- Parking mandates apply arbitrary standards across town lines. For example, a bar requires one parking space per 150 square feet in Greenwood Village, one per 100 square feet in Thornton, and one per three seats in Louisville – in all cases, more area is dedicated to parking than to running a business.
- Minimum parking mandates cost cities $1,000 per space in annual tax revenues, as land allocated for parking typically generates significantly less tax revenue than land used for buildings.
Parking mandates reinforce car dependence, leading to more pollution, sprawl, and other environmental problems.

- Excessive parking is directly linked to [more car ownership](#) and [vehicle miles traveled](#), increasing pollution from transportation, the [largest source of GHG emissions in Colorado](#).
- Oversized parking lots push destinations further apart and introduce curb cuts and drive aisles between sidewalks and front doors, making our communities more auto-centric and less walkable and transit-friendly.
- Massive surface parking lots [harm the environment](#) by increasing soil and water pollution, flooding, and the heat island effect.

### The Solution: Eliminate parking mandates.

*Importantly, eliminating parking mandates would not stop new parking spaces from being built. Rather, it would give each project the flexibility to have the amount of parking it needs.*

In cities that have already eliminated parking mandates, developers evaluate parking demand to determine an appropriate supply (often less than parking mandates previously required but sometimes more) and arrangement, whether exclusive, shared, or off-site.

### States and cities across the U.S. have eliminated parking mandates to meet housing, business, and climate goals.

- [Seattle, WA](#) (~734,000 pop.) eliminated parking mandates near transit and urban centers in 2012. By 2017, developers built 40% fewer parking spaces than would have been previously mandated, resulting in 18,000 fewer parking spaces and saving $537 million.
- [Minneapolis, MN](#) (~430,000 pop.) removed parking mandates in 2021, leading to a 30% reduction in parking. Typical rents of studio apartments fell 17% in buildings without parking.
- [Buffalo, NY](#) (~277,000 pop.) removed parking mandates citywide in 2017, allowing 1,000 homes to be built with 47% less parking than previously required.
- [Austin, TX](#) (~975,000 pop.) eliminated parking mandates citywide in 2023, becoming the most populated city in the US and the latest city in Texas to do so.
- [Oregon](#) passed parking reform in 2023, requiring jurisdictions to address parking mandates. As of January 2024, 13 jurisdictions have ended parking mandates. ([Minnesota](#) legislators have followed suit in 2024.)
Many Colorado cities have also reformed parking mandates.

- **Denver** (~710,000 pop.) removed parking mandates in several neighborhoods, and an analysis of 105 recently completed projects found that builders still provided plenty of parking, averaging 0.83 spaces per unit with a range from 0 spaces per unit to 1.9. If the City had required one parking space per unit (the low end of the regional average), these 105 projects would have built an additional 4,180 parking spaces, a 17% increase resulting in nearly $146 million in wasted spending.

- **Fort Collins** (~170,000 pop.) eliminated parking minimums near downtown bus rapid transit stations in 2006. A 2014 study of parking utilization, which included on-street parking in nearby residential communities, found parking occupancies of 24 - 85%, suggesting that, even in the absence of minimum parking mandates, builders were providing ample parking in new projects to prevent parking spillover.

- **Longmont** (~105,000 pop.) replaced minimum parking mandates with maximum parking caps for all new commercial development and all new multifamily residential development near transit and downtown after a 2021 parking study found that 15-50% of parking spaces in multifamily housing projects go unused.

Examples of Colorado housing projects that have benefited from parking reform:

- **Charity’s House**, a new housing project with 36 permanent supportive homes and six parking spaces, was initially rejected by the City and County of Denver. After gathering data on real-world parking demand, the City effectively eliminated parking mandates for affordable housing, allowing the project to advance.

- **The Burrell**, a 49-unit affordable housing project with zero parking spaces, benefits from parking mandate-free zoning in Denver’s River North neighborhood. In the absence of parking mandates, the builder arranged to share parking with two nearby and underutilized office parking garages.

- **Sheridan Station Apartments**, a 133-unit affordable housing project in Denver, was given the flexibility to lease 120 parking spaces from an adjacent RTD garage, saving the project millions of dollars and enabling the production of more affordable homes without negatively impacting RTD patrons.

*Without parking mandates, developers still offer ample parking to meet demand. The analysis above illustrates the parking ratios (spaces per unit) provided for 105 multifamily housing projects in Denver neighborhoods without parking mandates.*
RTD encourages redeveloping park-and-rides for affordable housing. (Since COVID, 80% of approx. 30,000 parking spaces sit empty.) Eliminating parking mandates will unlock tremendous potential for equitable transit-oriented development to support low-income households, regional economies, and climate health.

**Complementary tools to reduce parking demand and make the case for less parking supply.**

- Transportation Demand Management (TDM) leverages mobility technologies and services, multimodal transportation infrastructure, and financial incentives to support travel choices like transit, biking, and walking.
- Parking maximums set a supply cap, encouraging TDM investments from developers who otherwise may build excessive parking in areas intended for walkability and transit-friendly land use.
- Shared parking invites developers to negotiate with nearby property owners to efficiently utilize available parking between complementary land uses, like daytime office and nighttime dining.
- Unbundled parking frees residents without cars from automatically paying for a parking space by separating it from the housing lease.
- Managing parking through enforcement, demand studies and other means helps developers, lenders, elected officials, and other stakeholders build a database of right-sized parking supply.
- Paid parking - ideally by the hour or day rather than by the month - asks drivers to routinely consider the cost of parking in an effort to prompt greater use of sustainable transportation.
- Parking cash-out programs require employers to offer their employees monetary compensation or alternative transportation benefits in exchange for a parking space.
- On-street parking management efficiently dedicates short-term on-street parking to customers, deliveries, and non-auto users to support businesses that thrive on quick and frequent sales.

The City of Boulder created the Boulder Junction Access District (BJAD) to encourage non-vehicle travel and increased density in a 160-acre station area. BJAD establishes a trip-generation allowance for each property in the district and defines strategies to reduce trips resulting from redevelopment. Funded by district property taxes, strategies include sharing parking between properties, unbundling parking from leases and charging an additional parking fee, establishing maximum off-street parking mandates, and providing residents and employees with RTD Eco Passes.