

Our view: Less asphalt

Getting rid of excess parking saves cash and land

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Anchorage's city planners say their research and national "best practices" show the city zoning code requires more parking than we really need. Planners visited apartment houses and condos at night and offices during the day, when the lots should be full, to count the vehicles and the empty spaces. They found much extra space.

At the upscale Park Plaza II at 16th Avenue and A Street, which features efficiencies, one- and two-bedroom apartments, the number of parked vehicles was only 0.9 per unit. But the owners were required to build almost twice that much: 1.7 spaces per unit. Shrinking the parking requirement there from 163 to 90 spaces would have cut costs by \$3 million.

Lakeridge Commons off Jewel Lake Road is a complex of 54 units joined by a massive parking lot. There are 137 spaces where 102 would do, city planners say. The unnecessary parking cost an additional \$245,000 and required an extra 14,000 square feet of space, according to city estimates.

Likewise with a sampling of office buildings -- the Arctic Slope Regional Corp. office (the green, semi-circular building at 40th Avenue and A Street) and the nearby Alaska USA building among them. City code required significantly more parking spaces than vehicles actually use.

With those findings in hand, city planners are proposing to reduce city parking requirements. One-bedroom apartments, for example, would need only one space instead of the 1.7 spaces now required. Certain retailers, such as furniture and home-appliance stores, could build 1.7 spaces per thousand square feet of floor space, instead of 3.3 spaces.

The Anchorage Assembly is due to consider the proposal later this summer.

The city should reduce required parking as much as possible, and make the rules flexible enough to respond to circumstances such as if there's on-street parking available.

Reduced parking has many benefits, but here are four:

- It's cheaper for the developer. A parking space costs \$5,000 to \$8,000 to build, and that's outside. A space in a parking structure runs \$25,000 to \$40,000, says city planner Tom Davis. Parking makes up from 10 percent to 30 percent of the cost of housing, he says.

Some of the savings from reduced parking can go toward better design, which is badly needed in Anchorage.

- The less parking we have, the better it is for the environment. Areas that remain green allow water to seep naturally into the soil. Asphalt creates runoff and drainage problems.
- Paved parking lots increase the distance that people on foot or bicycles have to go to get to their destination. Look at Midtown from an airplane, and you'll see fields of empty asphalt separating the buildings.
- Parking lots are by and large not pleasing to the eye. To meet the parking requirements, some multi-family housing comes with nothing but asphalt -- not even a patch of lawn or a bush by the door.

In downtown Anchorage, businesses are not required to build their own parking because vehicles can park on the street or in numerous garages.

But elsewhere in the city, parking rules "are based on a 1980s notion that one size fits all, whether you are on a transit route, near downtown or way out in South Anchorage," Davis says.

It's time to change that. The planning department has demonstrated we need a lot less asphalt than the city code now requires.

BOTTOM LINE: City code doesn't have to require so much parking.