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Urbanizing Fairfax considers expansion of parking limits

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Fairfax County residents will have a harder time finding a free parking space in some neighborhoods if transportation planners get their way.

Working to ease traffic jams in the steadily urbanizing suburb, the county's Transportation Department is drafting [proposed rules](#) that would limit parking in new developments near Metro lines. Such parking limits have already been adopted by the Board of Supervisors as part of the plan governing Tysons Corner's transformation into an urban hub.

But imposing maximums in other parts of Fairfax where transit-oriented development exists would represent a significant departure in a suburb where generations of planners drew up plans around the automobile.

"This is a major shift. Other than Tysons, you could say this will be a first," said Dan Rathbone, chief of the transportation planning division in Fairfax.

Similar measures have been adopted in Montgomery County and other jurisdictions where population growth and new settlement patterns have transformed areas from suburbs into cities. Fairfax planners have paid particularly close attention to the transformation of neighboring Arlington County from a backwater of parking lots into a high-rise Metro corridor. Ballston's towers grew out of Parkington Shopping Center, whose name reflected one of its favorable attributes when it opened in 1951. Yet the number of jurisdictions in the United States that impose parking maximums on developers is still perhaps fewer than 50, Rathbone said.

"We often like to say that too much parking can be a traffic magnet," said Stewart Schwartz, executive director of the [Coalition for Smarter Growth](#). "If we're going to address traffic and make a walkable community in Fairfax, it's important to get the parking right."

Still, some builders and county officials are wary. In a county that covers about 400 square miles, they wonder whether people would buy homes without having a place to park.

"I think everybody recognizes there's a need for new parking ratios and parking limits, but the challenge is to figure out what are the right numbers," said Jon Lindgren, director of operations for the [Northern Virginia Building Industry Association](#). "It's mostly just making sure that builders have the flexibility to develop and build the kind of units that people want."

Flexibility concerns

Supervisor John C. Cook (R-Braddock) said he endorses the general concept of encouraging people who reside near Metro to use mass transit more and their cars less, but he also expressed unease about the measure's potential intrusiveness and lack of flexibility.

"You're really talking about not allowing developers to build parking spaces? How can you limit the number of cars somebody owns?" Cook said.

He and other skeptics wonder what would happen to people who purchased a townhouse with limited parking but then switched jobs or encountered some other circumstance affecting their ability to commute to work by Metro.

"They can't take the Metro if it goes the wrong way," Cook said.

Studies have shown that something as banal as a parking space has profound effects on whether a community is livable, affordable, navigable and environmentally sound. A study by the [Transportation and Land Use Coalition](#) of Silicon Valley housing patterns found that a single parking space could cost as much as \$25,000 and represent as much as 20 percent of the total cost of building an apartment building. In effect, the study found, parking spaces drove out people, particularly the elderly, renters and low-income residents and others without vehicles.

Donald Shoup, a professor of urban planning at the University of California  at Los Angeles who grew up in Alexandria, said free parking is anything but free. Shoup, who wrote the book ["The High Cost of Free Parking."](#) said the true costs of free parking are rolled into the cost of a house or office building. If anything, Shoup said, Fairfax has promoted cars for too long.

"If you look at it from the air, it looks like a parking lot," Shoup said.

Walkable communities

Schwartz said surveys also suggest that limiting parking and increasing mass transit play an important role in attracting younger people, who are less likely to define success as the single-family suburban home with a two-car garage. An analysis by real estate consulting firm Robert Charles Lesser & Co. found that, compared with the rest of the Washington metropolitan area, Fairfax attracted a smaller percentage of the fastest-growing segment of householders - those with one or two people per dwelling - in the past decade. Many of them prefer walkable communities, Schwartz said.

"The millennials, in particular, are sort of the Zipcar  generation," Schwartz said.

Kathy Ichter, director of Fairfax's Transportation Department, unveiled the draft proposal at a transportation committee meeting late last year.

Under current ordinances, new townhouses must have at least 2.75 parking spaces per dwelling. Under the draft recommendations, parking would be limited to 1.75 spaces per dwelling in a townhouse development less than a quarter-mile from a Metro station or 2.5 spaces per dwelling if the townhouse were located one-fourth of a mile to a half-mile from the station. Parking at commercial developments would be reduced from 2.6 parking spaces per 125,000 square feet of space to 2.1 if less than a quarter-mile from the Metro and to two spaces less than a half-mile away.

The Board of Supervisors would be required to adopt the guidelines as an ordinance for them to take effect. The county's Transportation Advisory Commission has endorsed the proposal, but only near the Metro lines.

Jeffrey Parnes, former president of the Fairfax County Federation of Citizens Associations, said the proposed policy is trying to catch up to the market, as many people who buy near Metro hubs chose those homes because they wanted to use mass transit. Parnes, who heads the advisory commission, said the proposed change is a modest first step, because cars will still be an important part of Fairfax's livability for many years.

"There's no doubt about it: You will need a car," Parnes said. "You won't need three cars."

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