

## Want to Foster Walking, Biking and Transit? You Need Good Parking Policy

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The high-water mark for American parking policy came in the early 1970s, when cities including New York, Boston, and Portland set limits on off-street parking in their downtowns. They were compelled to do so by lawsuits brought under the Clean Air Act, which used the lever of parking policy to curb traffic and reduce pollution from auto emissions. This level of innovation went unmatched over the ensuing three-and-a-half decades. Only now are American cities implementing effective new parking strategies that cut down on traffic.

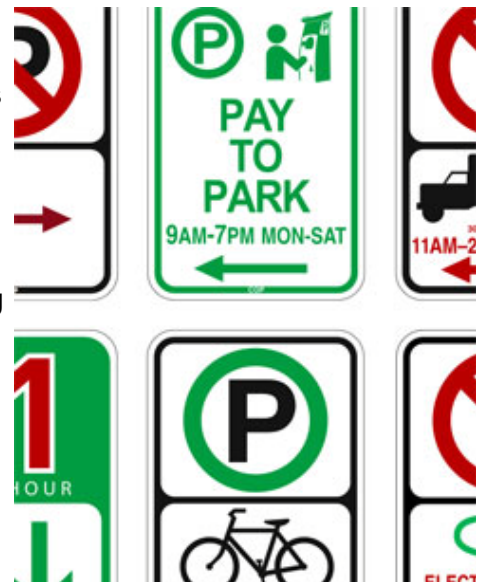
[A report](#) released today by the [Institute for Transportation and Development Policy](#) [PDF] highlights the new wave of parking policy innovation that could pay huge dividends for sustainable transport and liveable streets. If your city aspires to make streets safe, improve the quality of transit, and foster bicycling, then your city needs a coherent parking policy.

"There was a 35-year parking coma during which the federal government, cities, and environmentalists forgot why parking was important," said John Kaehny, who co-authored the report with Matthew Rufo and UPenn professor Rachel Weinberger. "This study shows people are starting to wake up and understand that parking is one of the most important influences on how cities work and what form of travel people choose to use."

The early 70s parking limits beat back the cycle of more car storage, wider roadways, and greater sprawl that decimates urban areas. The underlying idea was simple: Manage the supply of parking, and you can reduce the demand for driving. Yet in America this notion has gone largely unheeded, even in cities.

Instead, the authors note, parking policy is typically divorced from transportation policy and goals like reducing congestion or encouraging walking and biking. In most of our urban areas, planners determine parking volumes using suburban standards, drawing heavily on ill-suited recommendations in "Parking Generation," a manual published by the Institute for Transportation Engineers. The product is cheap, ubiquitous parking -- much of which sits unused most of the time.

Fully 99 percent of car trips in America end in free parking, an incentive that crowds out all other modes of transportation. "Even when the price of parking is free," said Weinberger, "it's far from free."



Graphic: ITDP

The resulting congestion impedes the effectiveness of transit. Traffic volumes and double-parking make bicycling less pleasant and more dangerous. Walkable environments give way to curb cuts, dead walls, and land-devouring parking facilities that spread destinations farther apart. The whole vicious cycle is heavily subsidized, with the cost of parking absorbed into the price of everything from housing to movie tickets.

"In a time of economic distress, we can't afford to continue these policies," said ITDP's Michael Replogle. "Continuing to subsidize parking is very costly for all of us."

### *Surface parking in downtown Minneapolis*



*Photo: ITDP/Zachary Korb*

The good news is that some cities are introducing more rational parking policies guided by coherent goals. The ITDP report pulls together case studies of several places where these reforms are underway -- information that the authors hope will spur other cities to take notice. "American parking policy is like bike policy a decade ago," said Kaehny. "Cities are doing lots of different and interesting things. But they aren't sharing what they learn in an organized way, nor are the feds helping spread the word about what is working and what isn't."

In San Francisco and New York, programs to bring the price of curbside parking more in line with off-street parking are reducing the incentive to cruise endlessly for a cheap spot. In Portland, planners have reduced parking requirements for new development near transit lines, helping to improve walkability and increase ridership.

This parking structure in downtown Boulder is wrapped with street-level retail. Image: ITDP/City of Boulder



Boulder provides an intriguing study in parking management as an economic development tool. This small Colorado city is one of the only places that introduced new parking policies during the 80s and 90s. After deciding they couldn't compete with suburban malls by imitating them, local merchants led an effort that effectively capped the volume of downtown parking and directed revenue from parking facilities to improve transit, walking, and bicycling.

Other cities will be able to replicate the innovations in the report, said UCLA planning professor Donald Shoup, author of *The High Cost of Free Parking*. "Weinberger, Kaehny, and Rufo show how cities can begin to repair the damage caused by decades of bad planning for parking," he said. "The case studies of six cities that have reformed their parking policies provide clear blueprints that any city can adapt to fit the local circumstances."

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