



# People Over Parking

Nanaimo's  
Parking Problem



Parking  
Whitepaper  
September 2024

## **Outdated Parking Policies**

Municipal parking requirements were designed when personal automobiles were seen as the universal mode of transport. These regulations, intending to reduce on-street congestion, have led to excessive parking infrastructure.

## **Negative Impact on Society**

Parking minimums are a subsidy to automobiles that negatively affect everyone, including drivers, by contributing to environmental damage, inefficient land use, and economic stagnation.

## **Equity**

Parking mandates require *everyone* to bear the costs associated with the storage of personal automobiles. This is a fee for households who do not or cannot use a vehicle. The consequence is that lower-income households are spending larger portions of their income on parking compared to more affluent households.

## **Urban Planning Challenges**

Excessive parking spreads all uses further apart leading to inefficient land use, increased vehicle emissions, and visually unappealing urban areas, replacing potentially productive land uses with vehicle storage.

## **Social and Aesthetic Issues**

Parking-dominated areas are unwelcoming and prioritize cars over people-friendly spaces, which hinders community interaction and prevents the density needed for vibrant neighbourhoods.

## **Proposed Reforms**

Strong Towns Nanaimo suggests two motions to reform municipal parking policies, aiming to address the negative impacts of current regulations and promote sustainable, equitable, and aesthetically pleasing urban development.

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# 1 Executive Summary

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Municipal parking requirements were initially implemented in a time when personal automobiles were assumed to be the best and primary mode of transportation. We have learned much about equity, finance, and the environment since those days and it is clear—parking minimums are a subsidy to the automobile which comes as a detriment to nearly everyone in society, including those who drive them. Parking minimums were created with the specific intent to alleviate on-street parking congestion. Ultimately, however, these regulations have resulted in an overabundance of parking infrastructure, leading to a host of urban planning challenges. This surplus parking not only degrades our environment through inefficient land use and increased vehicle emissions but also undermines economic vitality by replacing potentially productive land uses with unproductive parking for private vehicles. Aesthetically, places dominated by parking are unwelcoming and visually hostile urban landscapes. Socially, they are auto-oriented environments that prioritize vehicular movement over lively people-friendly spaces and human interaction and prevent the housing necessary for communities to thrive and develop over time.

In the face of these challenges, Strong Towns Nanaimo proposes two motions for the council's consideration to reform Nanaimo's municipal parking policies. These motions independently seek to rectify the adverse impacts of our current parking provisions and foster sustainable, equitable, beautiful, and prosperous urban development in our beloved city.

## **Elimination Of Parking Mandates**

Motion to change the word “required” to “recommended” in Section 7.3.3 Off-Street Parking Regulations Bylaw 2018 No. 7266.

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**OR**

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## **Expand Transit Oriented Areas**

Motion to expand section 7.3.(i) of the Off-Street Parking Regulations Bylaw 2018 No. 7266.03. (Transit-Oriented Areas) to cover all reliable and regular bus stops (defined by BC Transit as services of “at least 30 minutes at peak commute times.”) Source: RDN Transit Future Plan 2022.



## 2 Introduction

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### 2.1 Historical Context

In the realm of urban planning and development, municipal parking requirements have long been a staple of zoning ordinances and municipal policy across North America. The increase in personal automobile ownership and suburban sprawl seen through the mid-20th century dramatically increased vehicle traffic in cities, consequently leading to concerns about vehicle storage. In a well-meaning attempt to address congestion, planners and policymakers created parking minimums. They reasoned that if developers are required to provide parking on all new buildings, the supply of parking will rise to meet demand, alleviating congestion, enhancing accessibility for those travelling in personal vehicles, and supporting economic growth at large.

While this seems like a straightforward solution, most parking bylaws were based on little or no evidence and have remained foundational in the way we build our cities. One might reasonably assume that policymakers prescribe parking requirements based on context. If the data on this was lacking, perhaps they would commission a study. Sadly, neither assumption is true. Most often, parking minimums have been based on guesses, with municipalities often copying the minimums of neighbouring cities under an assumption of rigour. When data on parking has been gathered, little statistical backing is found; the Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE) continue to publish the definitive guide on parking allocation for municipalities. Even the ITE themselves note that the R2 value comparing the size of a property and the number of suggested parking stalls is a paltry 0.038. This means that *there is a 3.8% causal relationship between property size and the number of parking stalls mandated.*

Additionally, planners often looked to the busiest day at a typical establishment when considering how much parking ought to be built. The poor reasoning of this is obvious in hindsight: if one prescribes a department store to build as much parking as they will need on Black Friday, they will have a parking lot that is nearly empty the rest of the year. This is a colossal waste of urban space and a massive financial burden to the business in question.



The predictable result of these approaches is a massive oversupply of parking in many North American cities. The US Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration estimates that the USA hosts 1.5 billion parking spaces for only 278,870,463 registered vehicles. In 2018, Nanaimo underwent a parking study, and at each of the six sites surveyed, parking saw a paltry 25% occupancy. Regardless of how oversupplied parking is in this city, we don't believe that supply should be the only consideration. A city built to perfectly accommodate the convenience of automobile use has large environmental, aesthetic, fiscal, social, equity, health, and climatic impacts which we detail in this document.

Critics of conventional parking policies, including influential voices such as Donald Shoup, Chuck Marohn, Lewis Mumford, Jane Jacobs, and others, have since challenged the legitimacy of parking requirements. Notably, Donald Shoup in his seminal work "The High Cost of Free Parking" argues that mandates are a form of pseudoscience rather than sound urban planning practice. Shoup extensively documents how parking mandates distort development patterns, encourage car dependency, and exacerbate urban sprawl—all previously unforeseen detriments to our cities that modern, evidence-based planning is currently working to undo.

Despite reams of evidence demonstrating their harms, municipal parking requirements remain deeply entrenched in zoning codes across North America. In this document, we aim to detail issues associated with parking minimums across four broad categories: housing, aesthetics, environment, and economic.

## **3 How Parking Mandates Impact Housing**

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### **3.1 Parking Mandates Increase Housing Costs for Residents**

Nanaimo's Official Community Plan aims to facilitate the creation of a diverse range of housing types. However, one of the most significant challenges for anyone attempting to build denser forms of housing in our city is the requirement to provide excessive parking. Depending on the location, developers are forced to include between 0.5 and 1.45 parking stalls per bedroom. At first glance, this might seem reasonable—after all, there are areas in Nanaimo where shopping for groceries or dining out would be challenging without a personal vehicle.

Yet, this requirement is becoming increasingly outdated as Nanaimo rapidly improves its transportation network through substantial capital investments in infrastructure and amenities, alongside the RDN's adoption of the Transit Future Plan. It's well known that Nanaimo, like many other Canadian cities, is grappling with a housing affordability crisis. The requirement to build parking exacerbates this crisis, as the cost of these parking stalls inevitably gets passed down to future residents. For context, the City of Vancouver, which recently eliminated parking mandates city-wide, estimated the average cost of an underground parking stall is \$100,000 per stall, at minimum.

Forcing families who cannot, should not, or prefer not to drive to bear an additional \$100,000 burden for housing due to mandated parking is not just unnecessary—it's fundamentally unjust and inequitable. If we are serious about consumer choice and equity, the elimination of parking mandates must be a top priority. Our community is already struggling with the reality that homeownership is increasingly out of reach for many residents. If the City of Nanaimo is truly committed to facilitating the development of affordable housing, it must critically examine the financial burden imposed by its parking mandates.

### **3.2 Parking Mandates Kill Housing Development**

Nanaimo's parking mandates are not just a burden on homebuyers; they also significantly stifle the creation of new development. Housing is primarily built by developers who need projects to be financially viable. If a proposed development doesn't pencil out, construction simply doesn't happen. For instance, if a developer wanted to build 100 two-bedroom units in an apartment building in Harewood, they would be required to include 1.62 parking stalls per unit. This requirement would almost certainly necessitate the construction of an underground parkade due to spatial constraints. As previously mentioned, each underground parking stall costs around \$100,000. Here's what that means in financial terms:

- $(100\text{units}) \times (2\text{bed/unit}) \times (1.62\text{stalls/bed}) = 324 \text{ stalls}$
- $(324\text{stalls}) \times (\$100,000/\text{stall}) = \$32,400,000 \text{ total}$

Despite Nanaimo's stated goal of increasing housing stock, forcing a developer to spend millions on a parkade in a neighbourhood that is (1) well-served by transit, (2) walkable, and (3) bikeable is an enormous economic waste. This requirement creates a significant barrier to development. In an ideal scenario, a developer would conduct their own study to determine the appropriate amount of parking for a project, rather than being forced to invest millions in parking that is likely to be underutilized. These added costs not only hinder development but also drive up the price of each housing unit, further exacerbating Nanaimo's already severe housing affordability crisis.



Source: Parking Reform Network

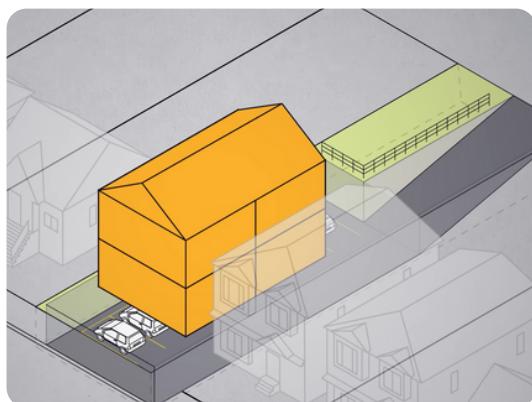
## **3 How Parking Mandates Impact Housing**

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### **3.3 Parking Mandates Prevent Incremental Development**

Equally important to the financial burden that parking mandates place on residents is the way these mandates obstruct development—particularly small-scale infill development—by monopolizing physical space. Parking mandates demand excessive space, directly competing with the creation of bus stops, bike parking, green spaces, and most critically, housing. While these spatial constraints can be managed more easily in greenfield developments on the city’s outskirts, where land is cheaper and lots are larger, Nanaimo’s goal to contain growth and preserve its surrounding environment makes prioritizing infill housing (developing underused parcels within existing urban areas) essential to addressing the city’s housing supply issues. Nanaimo’s own City Plan emphasizes infill as a key strategy for meeting the city’s housing needs. However, parking mandates directly undermine this goal. Requiring infill developments to accommodate parking on small lots makes many small-scale projects unfeasible under current policies.

For example, a hypothetical four-plex on a typical single-family lot, with two parking spaces per unit, would require an underground parking garage. This solution is impractical and a complete non-starter for development at this scale, both from an economic perspective and from a construction feasibility perspective. The physical constraints of a small lot often force developers and architects to prioritize parking structures in their designs, sacrificing other essential design elements such as park space, gardens, and shared amenities. This results in the development community often quipping, “form follows parking,” a play on the famous architectural principle “form follows function.”



Source: About Here

On the technical side, these underground parking structures typically require shoring due to the tight proximity to adjacent lot lines. Shoring involves reinforcing the excavation site to prevent soil collapse and ensure the stability of nearby structures. This process can be incredibly expensive, requiring specialized equipment, materials, and labour-intensive techniques. Developers on larger properties usually don’t face this challenge, enjoying more space to safely manage excavation without extensive reinforcement. The cost and complexity of shoring make underground parking unfeasible for small infill developments.

On page 4 of City Staff’s May, 6th report to council for Small-Scale Multi-Unit Housing, it was recognized that this type of infill housing would be inhibited by parking requirements. They state, “[it] will be important for property owners to understand that the maximum allowable density will not necessarily be feasible on all eligible lots when taking into account site constraints and other regulations (e.g. utility infrastructure, building code requirements, *parking regulations*, etc.)” Nanaimo’s staff openly recognizes the negative effect their parking mandates are having on creating housing.

If we want to get serious about building housing, particularly infill housing, we need to consider both the cost of construction and the physical lot constraints.



Source: Strong Towns Nanaimo

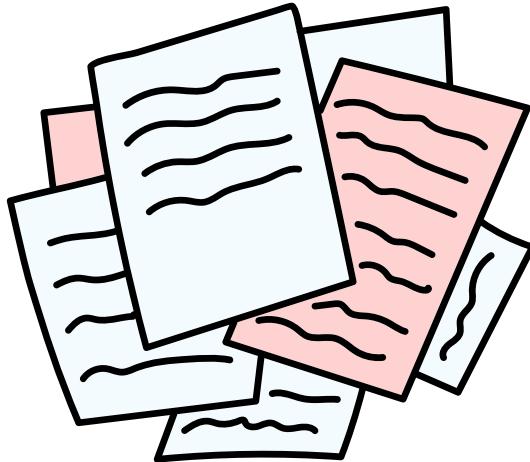
## **3 How Parking Mandates Impact Housing**

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### **3.4 Why Not Ask for a Variance?**

To accommodate new construction within existing lot sizes and height constraints many builders and businesses must request variances. This was an expectation from the City after it passed its City of Nanaimo Off-Street Parking Bylaw 7266. While this may seem a simple workaround, as parking variances are often granted by the current council, requesting a variance introduces risk and uncertainty that dissuades builders, potential business owners, and their lenders from creating plans. The request itself often takes months with no guarantee that such a request will not be rejected, possibly ending a project before it's even begun. This added step makes it difficult for small-scale developers and small local businesses to gather financing, essentially giving a leg up to large developers and franchises in the development and business worlds of our city.

Put yourself in the shoes of a local business in town. One day, you decide to open a cafe in Harewood, a neighbourhood in dire need of more community-oriented spaces. You find a prime location with an existing building that, with a couple of renovations, seems perfect for your cafe. You almost purchased the property, but you're informed by City staff that, to meet City parking requirements, you would need to double the amount of parking on the lot given the size of your cafe. You cannot afford to demolish part of the existing structure to add the required parking, so you request a variance with the City. You are now in bureaucratic limbo, unsure if the City will grant you a variance. If you were planning on acquiring financing for the renovations, then those are on hold too since your lender is unsure if you'll be granted your variance. Is it any wonder that more small-scale community-oriented commercial spaces aren't built in Nanaimo? When our city prioritizes parking over local businesses it is our residents who lose.



We have heard from many on Council and staff that variances are almost always approved when they're submitted. If this is truly the case—if Nanaimo understands that our existing parking mandates are precluding the construction of denser forms of housing and small businesses—then why do we subject developers to the financial uncertainty of the variance process? The barrier of a variance alone creates a condition where many projects don't even reach Council's desk, disappearing before they've begun. With the time burden that variances require, are our city's resources being well spent? If Nanaimo's council is already willing to allow changes to its parking bylaw whenever it is requested, why not remove the bureaucratic hurdle entirely? By observing how parking is treated in this city, one might conclude that the provision of parking is treated with greater importance than the amenities new businesses and housing could provide.



## **4 How Parking Mandates Impact Urban Aesthetics**

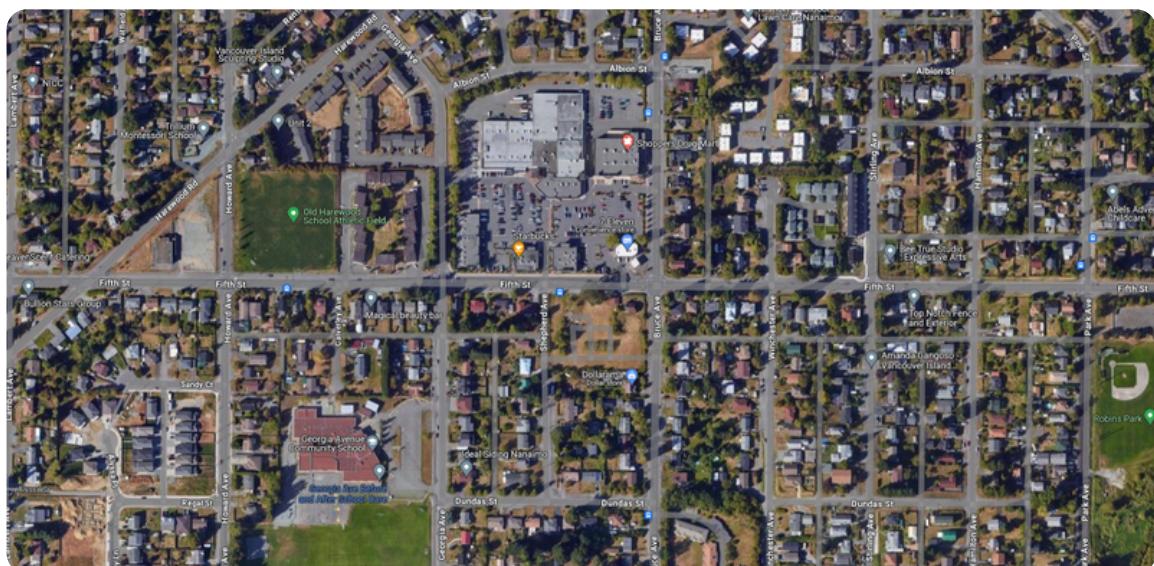
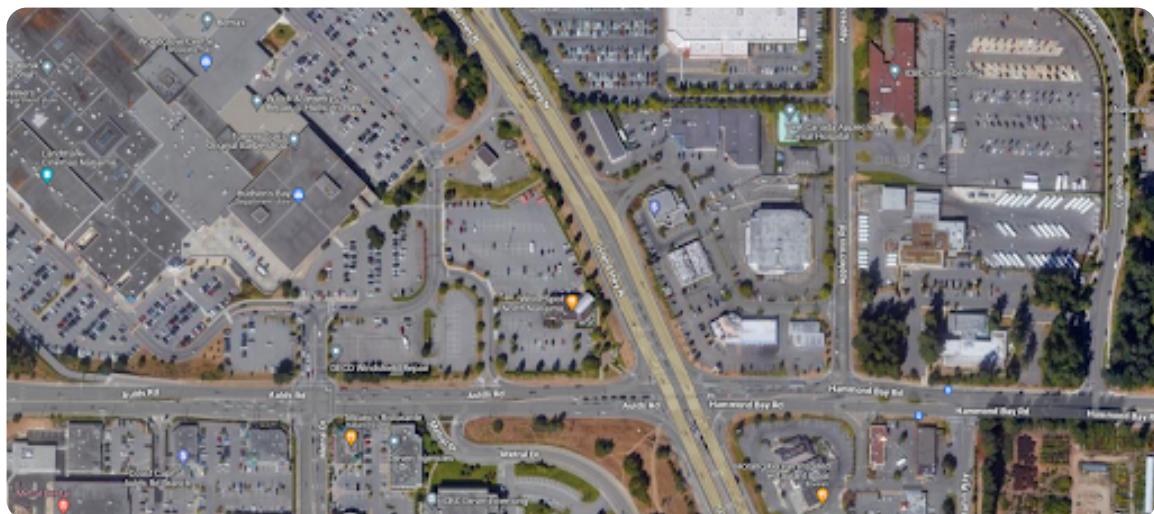
### **4.1 Building Form Suffers as a Result of Parking Mandates**

When parking is mandated, the geometry of a building is fundamentally altered. Almost every developer we've consulted has said something to the effect of: "Parking mandates restrict the kinds of developments we're able to build." Despite the city's support of higher density and mixed-use developments, parking mandates kill a great many of these when a developer is unable to fit mandated parking into their project.

Most lots in Nanaimo are not physically expansive enough to construct a surface parking lot, so developers need to work with engineers to explore the feasibility of parkades. Often, even if a parkade is technically possible, the project doesn't pan out financially due to the high cost of construction.

Buildings must also conform to setback requirements and FAR (Floor Area Ratio) requirements which limit the physical space that a developer can allocate for parking on a given property. To fit the form of the site, variances are often requested injecting uncertainty and financing difficulties into projects undertaken in Nanaimo. If a developer is forced to pave a large surface parking lot, they have less space to build, leading to smaller units and therefore less profit overall.

Parking mandates lead to excessive parking supply in developments, which consumes valuable urban space and encourages car-dependent lifestyles. Large parking lots create dead spaces that undermine walkability and the overall urban vitality of our neighbourhoods.



## **4 How Parking Mandates Impact Urban Aesthetics**

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### **4.2 Mandating Parking Creates Inhospitable Urban Spaces**

Parking mandates significantly contribute to the creation of inhospitable urban environments by—according to prominent urban thinkers such as Jane Jacobs and Donald Shoup—distorting the urban fabric, prioritizing cars over people, and hindering the development of vibrant, livable cities. Jane Jacobs, in her seminal work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, emphasizes the importance of mixed-use neighbourhoods, short blocks, and active street life. Parking mandates directly oppose these principles by spreading all uses farther apart or making them impossible to construct.

Mandating large surface parking lots or multi-story parking garages leads to the displacement of potential housing, shops, parks, and public spaces. This creates a monotonous, spread-out urban landscape where people are discouraged from walking, cycling, or engaging in street-level activities. Instead of vibrant, mixed-use neighbourhoods, we get vast, car-dominated areas that lack the "sidewalk ballet" Jacobs so admired. These spaces often become desolate and unsafe, particularly at night, as they lack the "eyes on the street" provided by active uses. Donald Shoup's work, particularly in *The High Cost of Free Parking*, details how parking mandates impose substantial economic, social, and environmental costs.

Shoup argues that these mandates distort land use by encouraging excessive parking provision, which in turn increases the cost of development and reduces the affordability of housing.

From an urban design perspective, the requirement for abundant parking leads to sprawling, low-density development. Surface parking lots consume large land areas, contributing to urban sprawl and making cities less walkable. Buildings are set back from the street to accommodate parking, which disrupts the pedestrian experience and creates uninviting spaces. This sprawl undermines the compact, human-scale environments that foster community and interaction. Many places in our downtown are emblematic of the high-quality human-scale places people love to visit. Would Nanaimo be better off hosting its night market in the Port Place Parking Lot?

Moreover, parking mandates prioritize car travel over other forms of transportation. This not only discourages walking, cycling, and public transit use but also perpetuates car dependency. Shoup highlights that by spreading things out and subsidizing car parking in the way that mandates do, we are contributing to a cycle of increased driving and demand for more parking — creating a self-reinforcing problem. To create more hospitable urban spaces, we need to rethink parking mandates. Reducing or eliminating these requirements can encourage the development of more compact, mixed-use neighbourhoods. It can also promote alternative modes of transportation, such as walking, cycling, and public transit, leading to healthier, more vibrant communities.

By drawing on the principles of Jacobs and Shoup, urban planners and policymakers can foster environments where people, not cars, are the priority. This shift is essential for creating cities that are not only livable but also sustainable and equitable. Reimagining urban spaces without stringent parking mandates can lead to developing dynamic, inclusive, and thriving communities that give us the best of urban living.



## 5 The Fiscal Implications of Parking Mandates

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### 5.1 How Parking Requirements Bleed Cities Dry Financially

What makes parking—and surface parking in particular—so destructive is that it consumes a finite resource (developable land) with virtually no direct financial benefit to the municipality. One focus that distinguishes Strong Towns from other urbanist groups is our preoccupation with municipal financing. Economically, parking—and particularly the huge lots that typically adorn strip malls and big box stores—is dead weight. It produces no tax revenue and does not increase the value of land. Local governments are constrained by the volume of land they have. How a city chooses to use its limited space can determine whether a city will be financially stable or insolvent and using this land for mandated off-street parking dilutes the critically important tax production of developments that cities rely on.

Let's take the case study of two identical blocks in the small town of Brainerd, Minnesota. They are the same size, on the same road, serviced by the same infrastructure, and cost the city the same amount of money to maintain. They are identical in every way but their development style. The first block was built in the 1920s in a traditional style: a series of extremely basic but functional structures. The many small-scale commercial units within allow for new upstart businesses to come and go, offering a degree of flexibility to meet the city's changing needs. The second block, two blocks over was the same until the city labelled it "blight" and had it bulldozed. In its place, a new fast-food taco restaurant was opened, utilizing all of the conventions we expect in modern suburban development: low density, large setbacks, and above all, plentiful off-street parking.

While the new fast-food restaurant gave the illusion of greater productivity and newness, the building built 100 years ago proved to be more productive from a tax base perspective. One building benefited the community for a century by funding infrastructure and allowing locals to innovate. The new drive-through, on the other hand, generated less tax value and lined a corporation's pockets elsewhere avoiding enrichment of the local community almost entirely.

When the City mandates off-street parking, it is pricing out locals and incentivizing big box companies that have the capital to dominate our city. Strong Towns Nanaimo wants to see a city where our residents flourish, not Walmarts and drive-thrus.



Source: Strong Towns Nanaimo



Source: Canva

# 6 Environmental Impacts of Parking Mandates

Parking mandates have significant negative externalities and feedback loops that impact both the environment and spatial organization of cities. In Nanaimo, parking requirements have forced many developments to construct extensive surface-level parking lots to comply with city bylaws. While these laws may seem harmless at first glance, they have profound and damaging consequences for our community's environmental and climate goals.

## 6.1 Direct Environmental Impacts of Surface Parking

Surface parking lots contribute to significant environmental issues, particularly through surface impermeability and water runoff. This runoff places pressure and additional costs on Nanaimo's physical infrastructure. Large amounts of impermeable surfaces make these places drier, dirtier, and unsuitable for the kinds of wildlife and biodiversity that Nanaimo holds so dear.

Additionally, the extensive use of land for parking reduces green spaces and increases urban heat island effects, further compromising environmental quality and sustainability.

## 6.2 Space Constraints and Car Dependency

Nanaimo, nestled between mountains, forests, and the ocean, has limited space. Parking minimums, especially for larger residential and commercial developments, often lead to massive surface parking lots. While this may seem an unavoidable part of living, it spreads out basic amenities, creating an environment hostile to those who cannot, will not, or should not drive. This spatial distribution virtually forces residents who may be perfectly happy without an automobile to purchase and maintain one to have a meaningful quality of life in Nanaimo. When people come here from Vancouver or Victoria, they often buy a car. While sprawl is not the only cause of this car dependency (transit and bicycle infrastructure are the other primary causes), spreading amenities farther apart makes walking between desired places in town take forever, and so people look to how they might get there faster. If riding a bicycle feels dangerous and transit does not come frequently enough, people will buy cars.

## 6.3 Nanaimo Reimagined

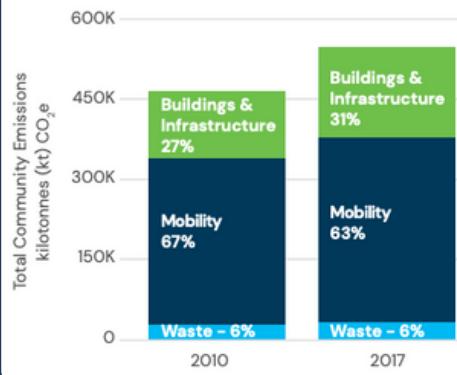
The reduction of greenhouse gas emissions was placed at the forefront of Nanaimo's forward-thinking plan — Nanaimo Reimagined. The plan states:

*"City of Nanaimo Council declared a Climate Emergency in 2019. To mitigate climate impacts, Nanaimo is taking a leadership role to significantly reduce our GHG emissions through changes to our buildings, mobility (transportation) system, solid waste management, and in our decision-making."*

The elimination of parking mandates would bring Nanaimo into better alignment with its own city plan. The City's goal is to *"[be] a model of efficient use of land and resources to create healthy and comfortable built environments through individual and collective behaviour change; zero carbon and energy-efficient buildings, neighbourhoods, and employment centres."*

These are noble goals that the elimination of parking mandates would help realize. As our city grows over time and pursues multi-modal forms of transportation, many more residents will likely opt for a car-light lifestyle. As this process unfolds over the coming decades, developments will adapt to Nanaimo's future parking needs, possibly leading to smaller parkades using less concrete (and therefore fewer embodied emissions), a reduction in impermeable surface parking, and more efficient use of Nanaimo's limited space and resources. If the city truly wants to reach its goal of reducing carbon emissions to 50% of 2010 levels, then the city needs to start making longer-term choices now —not 25 years from now. This is what climate leadership looks like.

Figure 7: Sources of Emissions in Nanaimo



Source: Nanaimo Reimagined City Plan

## 7 Case Studies

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### 7.0 Parking Reform is Growing

While to many Canadians and residents of Nanaimo, market-controlled parking might seem unthinkable, parking reform is anything but new. Below is a map of all cities in North America that have removed their parking mandates or relaxed their parking requirements city-wide (as of 2024-08-20).

Hundreds of cities across North America have embraced the project of allowing their cities to choose for themselves how much parking they need. Below are four case studies of cities and small towns in North America that have embarked upon their versions of parking reform. Parking reform isn't fringe—momentum is building across North America for change. Canadian cities as large as Toronto, O.N. (population 2,794,356) to towns as small as Lunenburg, N.S. (population 2,263) have discovered the potential that eliminating parking mandates holds. For a full list, you can visit [parkingreform.org/resources/mandates-map](https://parkingreform.org/resources/mandates-map) and see a live version of this map.

### Notable Cities, Towns & Country

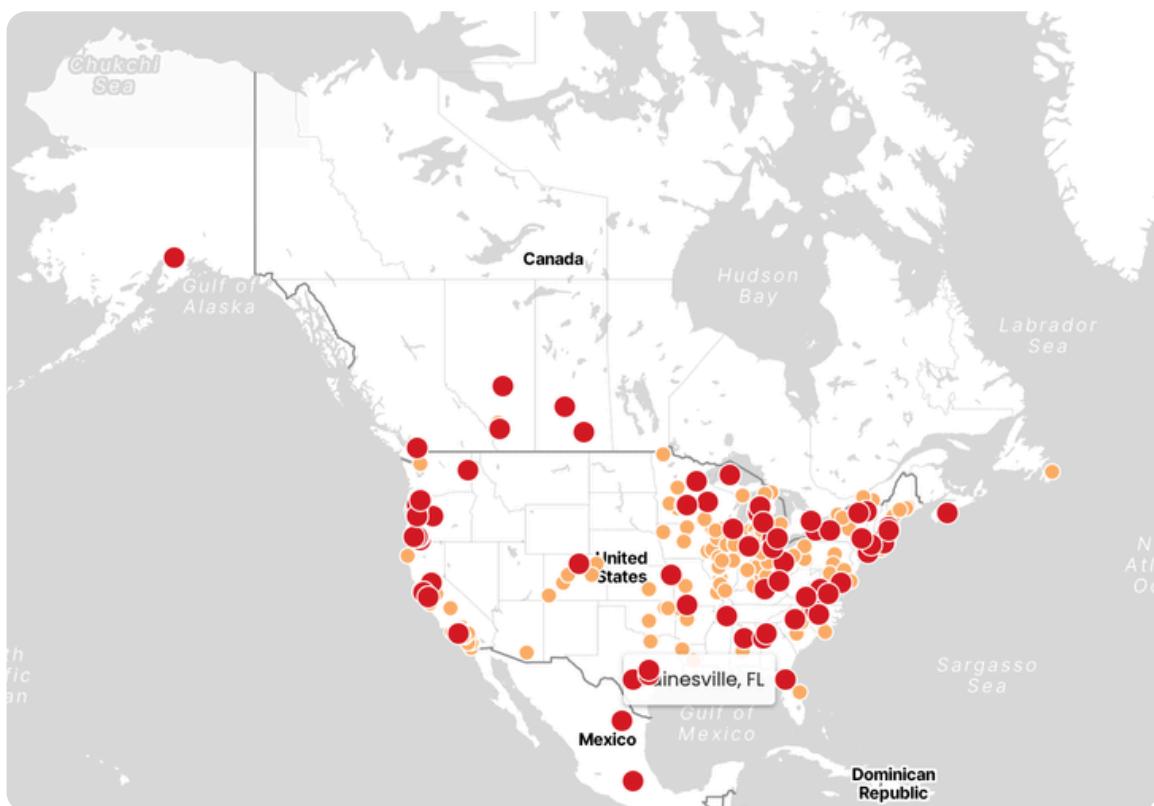
Below is a list of notable towns, cities, and, in one case, a whole country that has done away with parking mandates.

- Toronto, ON (Pop: 2,731,571) Canada
- Lunenburg, NS (Pop: 2,263) Canada
- Saskatoon, SK (Pop: 266,141) Canada
- Spokane, WA (Pop: 228,989) USA
- Lansing, KS (Pop: 11,239) USA
- Taylor, TX (Pop: 16,267) USA
- Grants Pass, OR (Pop: 39,189) USA
- High River, AB (Pop: 13,584) Canada
- Regina, SK (Pop: 228,928) Canada
- Gastonia, NC (Pop: 80,411) USA
- Charlottesville, VA (Pop: 80,411) USA
- South Bend, IN (Pop: 102,026) USA
- San Pedro Garza García, NL (Pop: 132,128) Mexico
- New Zealand (Pop: 5,124,000)

Source: <https://parkingreform.org/mandates-map/>

### Eliminating Parking Mandates is Not a New Idea

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Source: <https://parkingreform.org/mandates-map/>

## 7 Case Studies

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### 7.1 Buffalo, New York, USA

In 2017, the city of Buffalo, NY made headlines by becoming the first major city in North America to eliminate parking mandates. Their policy was twofold: the city removed parking requirements for all buildings and put in place a requirement for large developments to create transportation demand management plans. By requiring these plans the city is now treating transportation holistically rather than with assumptions and mandates.

To quote a recent CBC Article on Buffalo, they “got rid of parking minimums and ‘the sky did not fall.’” While there were many fears of parking shortages in this new unregulated space, the city found that “removing parking minimums spurred development rather than stifling it.” Buffalo found that where development shined most was in creating “low-rise infill projects and conversions.” Buffalo was one of the first North American cities to discover that the policy of parking mandates was preventing the creation of housing the city desperately needed. After seeing the benefits of the change, the city has never turned back.

“The sky did not fall and people can still get around.”

“[R]emoving parking minimums spurred development rather than stifling it”

“Doomsday predictions” have not come to pass”

**Source:** CBC NEWS



## 7 Case Studies

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### 7.2 Spokane, Washington, USA

We turn next to the City of Spokane, Washington where only weeks ago the city fully removed parking mandates for all uses citywide. However, what makes Spokane such an interesting case study is the previous efforts by the city council and staff to lay the groundwork for this change. On July 17th, 2023 Spokane handed partial decision-making power to its residents by “making off-street parking optional for all housing use within a 1/2-mile of a transit stop.” This interim zoning ordinance made it so that no parking minimums or maximums would be mandated on housing—something the city desperately needs. Spokane recognized that soaring housing prices were worsening its residents’ lives and took short-term actions that could alleviate possible housing construction barriers while allowing its city staff time to form a longer-term parking reform strategy.

When thinking inside the Nanaimo context, Spokane provides an interesting blueprint for how a city can begin to explore parking reform. The city rightly identified housing affordability as being not only a top priority but as an actual emergency. Next, the city looked to identify ways its by-laws were making housing harder to construct, parking was increasingly becoming a barrier that slowed housing production and made small-scale multi-unit housing projects infeasible. By linking the removal of parking mandates with public transit the city had time to see the early effects of this change and make iterative adjustments.

In Nanaimo’s current parking bylaw, there is little to no flexibility to allow Nanaimo residents to explore new and spatially creative ways to accommodate parking. Through this policy, Spokane has created an environment of proactive, yet incremental change. This iterative approach can pare well with Nanaimo’s current goal of encouraging transportation mode shifts over the coming decades. Spokane has demonstrated itself as an example of a city that treats the question of parking with a paintbrush versus a hammer. Aligning our parking strategy with transit would allow the city to grow and change gradually adapting to its real, rather than perceived, parking needs. With an expansion of the current TOA bylaw, the city could create an environment much like Spokane where public investment in transit is paired with policies that encourage its use.

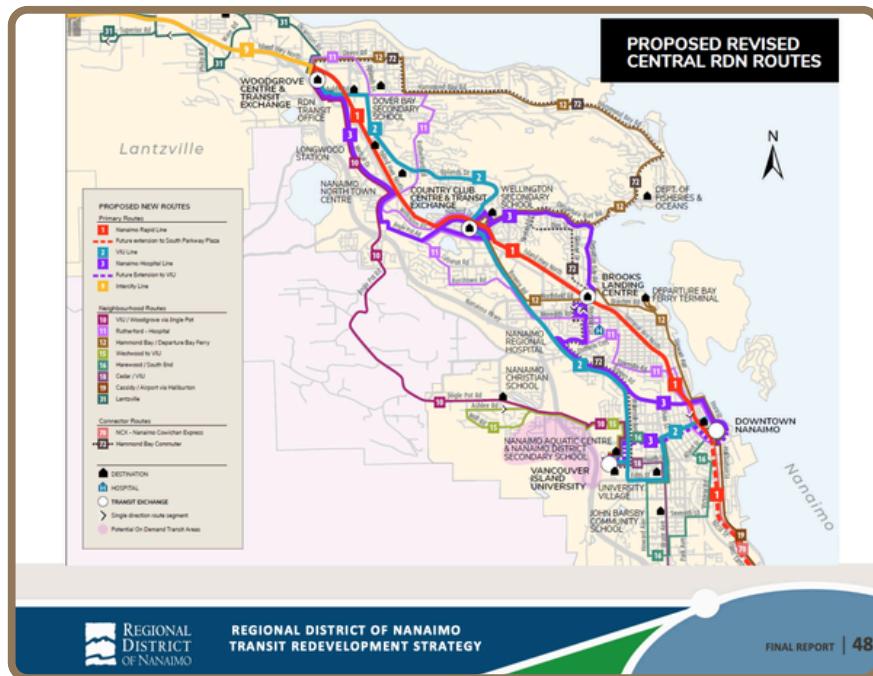
#### “Spokane Leads the Way with Parking Reform”

**Source:** The Urbanist



## 7 Case Studies

### 7.2 Spokane, Washington, USA



Source: RDN Transit Future Plan (2022)



Source: Spokane Rising

## 7 Case Studies

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### 7.3 Sandpoint, Idaho, USA

While in our two previous case studies, Buffalo and Spokane were able to answer what the right amount of parking looks like for their communities, one might argue that these communities have large transportation systems; this next example, however, shows that even fully car dependent municipalities can gain benefits from eliminating or amending their parking mandates. Sandpoint is a rural ski town in Northern Idaho. With minimal bus service, the town of just over 10,000 people is primarily rural in nature. However, when a new downtown development destroyed a historic building and displaced small businesses to add the required parking by the Town of Sandpoint, the council took action. It implemented a parking-exempt zone downtown and removed cash-in-lieu parking fees for small businesses. The town also implemented policies outside of the exempt zone allowing parking to be provided within 300m of apartments and space sharing. All of this adds to the flexibility of the town's parking ecosystem. Parking is still provided in Sandpoint, but now with a clear acknowledgement of the spatial constraints that often inhibit businesses from starting or buildings from being created. When presented with the choice of parking or people, Sandpoint chose its residents.



The results of these changes are that small businesses in the town have flourished and the city hosts a multitude of events all year round. All of this was done with the understanding that the amenities created by their community were greater than the need to accommodate parking in every building and business. Since 2009, the city hasn't looked back. Strong Towns even wrote an article on how Sandpoint's success is creating more businesses in their downtown through the removal of parking mandates.

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#### Important Note

While Nanaimo has its own downtown parking exemption for commercial uses, Sandpoint differs on one key point — *Sandpoint does not mandate a certain amount of parking for residential spaces whereas Nanaimo's parking bylaw does.*

#### Downtown Exemption Zone for All Uses + Exemption Zone for Commercial



Source: [https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/sandpointid/latest/sandpoint\\_id/0-0-0-6145](https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/sandpointid/latest/sandpoint_id/0-0-0-6145)

## 7 Case Studies

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### 7.4 Parking Reform Across British Columbia

Over the past year, British Columbia has been experiencing a paradigm shift in the way cities are planned. With the passage of Bill 44, municipalities have had to amend bylaws to allow for more incremental density resulting in areas which are exempt from city parking mandates due to their proximity to transit exchanges. As cities have adopted bylaws to include higher-density housing forms, the province has enacted recommendations for cities to consider how parking mandates will inhibit the success of any well-intentioned policies.

In response to this new paradigm of small-scale housing, municipalities explored how housing and parking could be accommodated on lots previously zoned for single-family homes. Out of this environment, municipalities as diverse as Saanich, Penticton, Vancouver, Burnaby, Kelowna, and Parksville have all amended their parking bylaws to make small-scale multifamily housing possible.

This has put Nanaimo as an *exception* rather than the rule when it comes to allowing incremental density. Where other cities have recognized that overly restrictive parking mandates inhibit housing production, Nanaimo chose to maintain its legacy parking mandates regardless of the shift in zoning making this type of housing much more difficult to produce.

Nanaimo does not have to look far for a model of what parking reform could look like. In response to Bill 44, the city of Saanich began reforming its parking requirements. The city went as far as designating its own “Small Scale Multi Unit Transit Proximity Area” which eliminates parking mandates on small multiunit housing (note: transit proximity has been defined by the City of Saanich as “*an area within 400 metres of a SSMUH Bus Stop*”).

This policy intentionally mirrors closely our second recommendation to council.

As Nanaimo looks to spur the construction of denser forms of housing while simultaneously promoting transportation mode shifts, we need only to look to another city on Vancouver Island for an example of how to bolster housing stock.

These changes are gradual and are crafted to address the unique challenges present in each community. While every municipality’s policy may differ in its specifics, they all recognize in some way that mandatory parking mandates and small-scale multi-unit housing are at odds with one another. If Nanaimo wants to get serious about building more homes, parking reform is a great first step.



## **8 Conclusion**

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### **Conclusion**

Nanaimo stands at a critical juncture—the decisions made today regarding parking mandates will shape the future of urban development, livability, and sustainability in our city. As demonstrated throughout this paper, the current parking requirements have far-reaching negative consequences on housing affordability, urban aesthetics, municipal finances, and environmental health. These mandates, which were implemented with the best of intentions, have inadvertently stymied development, driven up housing costs, and prioritized vehicles over the needs of our community. The evidence is clear: parking mandates significantly increase the cost of housing making many projects impossible, both for developers and residents, creating an unnecessary financial burden that is particularly detrimental in the context of Nanaimo's ongoing housing crisis. These requirements also lead to inefficient land use, resulting in sprawling developments that detract from the compact, walkable, and vibrant urban spaces that cities like Nanaimo aspire to cultivate.

From a fiscal perspective, the maintenance and expansion of parking infrastructure represent a considerable drain on municipal resources, diverting funds away from more productive uses that could enhance the city's economic vitality. Environmentally, the prevalence of surface parking lots contributes to urban heat islands, increased stormwater runoff, and higher greenhouse gas emissions due to forcing car dependency on residents, undermining efforts to address climate change and promote sustainability.

The case studies of cities such as Buffalo, Spokane, Sandpoint, and BC municipalities illustrate that it is not only possible but also beneficial to reform parking policies. These cities have shown that eliminating parking mandates can lead to more dynamic, equitable, and sustainable urban environments. They serve as valuable examples for Nanaimo, highlighting the potential for positive change through thoughtful policy adjustments.

In light of these findings, Strong Towns Nanaimo proposes two key motions for council's consideration: the full elimination of parking mandates or the expansion of the Transit Oriented Area program. By changing the word "required" to "recommended" in the Off-Street Parking Regulations Bylaw or expanding the TOA areas to cover Nanaimo's transportation system, we can begin to mitigate the adverse impacts of current parking provisions. These measures will help to foster a city that prioritizes people over cars, encourages diverse and affordable housing options, and supports a vibrant, sustainable urban fabric. Addressing Nanaimo's parking problem is not merely about altering parking policies; it is about reimagining the city's future. By embracing reform, we have the opportunity to create a more equitable, economically robust, and environmentally sustainable Nanaimo. The time to act is now, and with the support of policymakers, planners, and the community, we can build a city that truly reflects our shared values and aspirations.

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**Nanaimo has already solved the housing crisis...for cars. Strong Towns Nanaimo is asking Nanaimo City Council and Staff to put *people over parking*.**



**STRONG TOWNS NANAIMO**

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Louis James, Michael Bassili, and Friends

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## **9 Frequently Asked Questions**

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### **9.1 Will Eliminating Parking Mandates Lead To A Parking Shortage?**

Removing mandates doesn't mean eliminating parking; it allows developers and business owners to provide parking based on actual demand rather than arbitrary requirements. Developers can still build parking if they see a market need. In single-family neighbourhoods, garage spaces are used for storage or converted suites rather than parking, demonstrating residents making their own decisions concerning parking.

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### **9.2 How Will Businesses Be Affected?**

Businesses can benefit from the elimination of parking mandates, as it reduces their development costs and allows for more flexible use of space. They can decide how much parking is needed based on their customer base rather than conforming to a one-size-fits-all regulation.

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## **9 Frequently Asked Questions**

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### **9.3 Won't This Hurt Local Businesses That Rely On Customers Driving?**

Experience from other cities shows that eliminating mandates can enhance local business by creating more walkable, bike-friendly, and transit-oriented areas, which attract a broader range of customers. As parking is a space for car storage, parking does not lend itself to allowing for spontaneous entry and exit of businesses. For businesses that rely on their parking lots for customers, the elimination of parking mandates does not and would not change the existing amount of parking. In other words, if businesses have and use parking lots, it is their right to continue to keep these spaces for their existing use.

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### **9.4 What About People Who Still Need To Drive?**

People who drive will still be able to find parking. The difference is that parking supply will be driven by market demand rather than regulations, leading to more efficient use of space. Living on an island means Nanaimo must responsibly use the limited land it has. Removing parking mandates provides residents the ability to choose how they wish to get around. If residents need to drive, businesses will still cater to this need and can choose to build the parking they need.

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- J. Richard Kuzmyak, Rachel Weinberger, Richard H. Pratt and Herbert S. Levinson (2003), *Parking Management and Supply*, Chapter 18, Report 95, Transit Cooperative Research Program; Transportation Research Board ([www.trb.org](http://www.trb.org)).
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## **9 Frequently Asked Questions**

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### **9.5 How Will This Affect Public Transportation?**

Eliminating parking mandates can over time encourage greater use of public transportation by making cities more transit-friendly and reducing reliance on cars. This can lead to improved public transit services as demand increases. This process will be gradual, over the course of decades, and many of these effects will not be experienced for years.

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### **9.6 Is This Policy Change Environmentally Friendly?**

Yes, reducing parking mandates can significantly benefit the environment. It decreases urban sprawl, lowers greenhouse gas emissions, reduces stormwater runoff from large impervious parking lots, and helps preserve natural spaces and their ecological services.

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## **9 Frequently Asked Questions**

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### **9.7 How Will This Policy Change Affect People With Disabilities?**

Developers can (and should) still be required to provide accessible parking spaces. The goal is to ensure accessibility while removing unnecessary parking requirements.

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### **9.7 How Will This Policy Change Affect People With Disabilities? (Transit Oriented Areas Example)**

In Nanaimo's parking bylaw (Off-Street Parking Regulations Bylaw 2018 No. 7266) the number of accessible parking spaces is determined purely by the amount of parking provided. Currently, Nanaimo has Transit-Oriented Areas where buildings are exempt from parking mandates. As developers choose how much parking to provide they will still be required to provide a certain amount of accessible spaces based on the below chart.

Number of Vehicle Parking Spaces on Off-Street Parking Plan	Number of Required Accessible Parking Spaces
1-10	0 spaces
11-32	1 space
33-100	1 per 33 spaces
101-1000	3 spaces for the first 100, plus 1 per 50 spaces for the remainder
1001+	21 spaces for the first 100, plus 1 per 100 spaces for the remainder

Source: <https://www.nanaimo.ca/bylaws/ViewBylaw/7266.pdf>