

# EAST BAY EXPRESS

## A Green Solution to Oakland's Housing Crisis

If the city stopped building giant parking garages, it could become a leader in sustainable development — and create more affordable housing in the process.

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August 5, 2015

Jason Laub did not want to dig a giant hole in the ground in North Oakland. On a recent morning, Laub stood in front of a chain-link fence protecting a vacant lot on Telegraph Avenue between 47th and 48th streets in the Temescal district. Laub, vice president of the Nautilus Group, an Oakland-based development firm, was giving me a tour of his company's three residential projects underway in the neighborhood — all located in a three-block radius in the center of the bustling commercial district.

At our first stop at 4700 Telegraph Avenue, where Nautilus Group plans to build a 48-unit apartment building, Laub described the various options for ground excavation at the site. The firm's engineers, he explained, have worked to minimize the project's underground footprint. Guiding the discussion of how deep and how wide the company would need to dig was a question that has long vexed local developers: how many parking spaces should new residential projects include?

The deceptively simple question touches on one of the most critical and controversial topics of modern urban development. And the debate surrounding the construction of parking spaces for apartment buildings is now gaining momentum in Oakland as real estate investors are increasingly purchasing land and building new housing near BART stations — in neighborhoods where driving and car ownership have become much less essential.

On this stretch of Telegraph Avenue next to the popular brunch spot Aunt Mary's Café and near the neighborhood cycling store Tip Top Bike Shop, the company plans to demolish a group of old, two-story residential properties and build a modern-looking, five-story building with mostly market-rate units and a ground-floor commercial space — possibly housing a microbrewery, Laub said.

"There's some really great small businesses, really great culture, great food," Laub said, when I asked him why Nautilus chose to do its first major Oakland projects in this neighborhood. "We want to be part of it and contribute to creating a very vibrant and thriving area here." Plus, he said, the project is close to public transportation.

Nautilus Group's three Temescal projects — 4700 Telegraph, 4801 Shattuck Avenue (one block west), and 5100 Telegraph (three blocks north) — are all just a ten- to fifteen-minute walk from the MacArthur BART Station. The City of Oakland is also in the process of redesigning Telegraph to be significantly more bike-friendly. It will soon implement Oakland's first-ever protected bike lane, meaning a roadway exclusively for cyclists separated from car traffic by a barrier. Given the proximity to BART, numerous AC Transit bus lines, and increasingly bike-friendly roads in the area, residents of Temescal can

comfortably travel around the neighborhood and get to other parts of Oakland and the Bay Area without a car.

And because there is clearly demand for housing from residents who don't own cars and prefer biking, walking, and public transit, Nautilus Group has been working for months to plan and gain approvals for a design of its 4700 Telegraph project that does not cater to auto-dependent tenants. The company's proposed concept may seem obvious and non-controversial to those who support greener modes of transit, but given Oakland's history of encouraging — and in many ways requiring — developers to accommodate car owners, Nautilus' plan actually offers a somewhat revolutionary approach. Instead of constructing at least one parking space for each of the 48 units — which would be the default minimum standard for a project of this size in this location, according to Oakland's planning rules — the developers have secured a special exemption from city officials and will construct half the number of spaces in the project's on-site garage.

"Building parking is very expensive," Laub said. "If we can reduce the number of parking spaces that we build ... that means we can do a lot of other things for this project." Depending on the project and location, a single parking space can cost a developer anywhere from \$35,000 to \$75,000 to build, Laub said. For 4700 Telegraph, instead of building 48 residential parking spots (and 8 commercial parking spaces) in an underground 16,000-square-foot lot that has a footprint the size of the entire project, Nautilus will only be installing 24 spaces for tenants in an 8,200-square-foot garage.

With the financial savings from this reduced parking plan, Nautilus will be able to provide all residents with discounted public transit passes, free car-share memberships, secured bike parking, and other amenities. The company, however, had to go through an extensive process to convince city officials to let its project bypass municipal parking rules — the kind of effort that developers in Oakland have rarely completed on this scale. Instead, most developers continue to follow the city's planning guidelines and rules — and build large parking garages in areas where they aren't needed.

For this reason, environmentalists and housing advocates have begun pushing the city to allow and encourage developers to construct significantly fewer parking spaces than the Oakland Planning Code requires. And urban planning experts have increasingly recognized that overly strict municipal parking policies — which typically force developers to spend a significant amount of money building one or more parking space per new unit — ultimately drive up the cost of housing and stymie the creation of affordable units.

Critics point out that outdated suburban-style planning policies — like the ones Oakland still uses — incorrectly assume that all residents drive and want parking included in their rents. In truth, the much higher costs associated with mandated parking make housing less affordable for middle- and low-income people. Indeed, outmoded parking policies can help accelerate gentrification by forcing the construction of apartment buildings that attract wealthier people who own multiple cars and can afford to pay the higher rents that come with excess parking, thereby squeezing out lower-income tenants who want to live greener lifestyles.

One recent [analysis](#) of cities across the United States found that the costs of constructing parking garages with one spot per apartment result in average increases in rent of \$2,700 per year. The study was conducted by Reinventing Parking, an international transportation advocacy group. The impacts of excess parking on affordability tend to be more severe in

denser urban areas because land is more costly and developers typically have to spend more to create structured garages (as opposed to paved surface lots, which are cheaper).

Led by Oakland-based nonprofit group TransForm, transportation and housing activists are pushing for local developers and the city to fundamentally rethink residential parking in a way that lowers costs for renters and shifts real estate investments toward affordable housing and sustainable modes of transit — and away from expensive parking garages.

Through its initiative called Green Traffic Reduction and Innovative Parking (GreenTRIP), TransForm has compiled and analyzed extensive data illustrating the potentially profound benefits of progressive parking strategies. The group's research sheds light on how archaic rules have led to extremely inefficient uses of space and financial resources in Oakland development projects. TransForm's research also shows that the city could make significant strides in tackling its housing affordability crisis and fighting climate change if it eliminated regressive parking requirements.

Yet it remains to be seen whether Oakland is willing to go far enough in adopting progressive reforms that could limit the spread of new parking and establish the city as a leader in sustainable development. And the need for change, advocates say, is urgent as rents skyrocket at alarming rates in Oakland and as real estate investors continue to propose and break ground on new projects. If Oakland doesn't get it right soon, it could mean an influx of new development that lacks forward-thinking designs — and instead continues the promotion of 20th century car culture, harmful emissions, and unaffordable rents for years to come.

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In the 1910s, the proliferation of automobiles started to shape the way cities and towns approached planning and development. Local governments began designing their cities in a way that encouraged — and required — families and workers to drive everywhere.

Federal law in the 1920s paved the way for municipalities to start using zoning policies to guide and regulate growth, and in 1926, the landmark Supreme Court decision *Euclid v. Ambler* enabled governments to exercise much greater control over land use on private property. That case gave birth to what is known as "Euclidean zoning," the practice of governments creating distinct districts with singular land uses — meaning residential areas, office parks, industrial zones, and shopping mall centers, all geographically isolated from one another. It was the policy basis for the American vision of suburbia — a lifestyle in which automobiles reigned.

Car-oriented development persisted for decades. Oakland created its first zoning policies in 1935, establishing separate residential, commercial, and industrial districts. Yet despite these conventional zoning practices, the city had some fairly forward-thinking urban planning in the 1930s. Most notably, the city's Key System streetcar network connected many residential neighborhoods, such as Montclair and Lakeshore, to a dense, vibrant downtown.

But automobile use skyrocketed, and transportation officials eventually dismantled Oakland's streetcar system in 1958. Meanwhile, federal, state, and local governments expanded the regional freeway network, cutting through, and in some cases, destroying existing neighborhoods and communities in the 1950s and 1960s. "It was the car that really

caused the demise of Oakland," said Rachel Flynn, director of the city's planning and building department.

In more recent decades, there has been increasing awareness in Oakland and across the country that these car-centric urban planning policies came with grave long-term consequences. "Cars dominated urban development in the Bay Area and most of California, so unwinding that is going to be a multi-decade process," said Ann Cheng, director of GreenTRIP. "The cost to our health, climate, and economy — there's just so many reasons why those days are over."

Among environmental and transportation advocates, there is now widespread recognition that in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, policymakers must spur smart growth in cities, meaning building high-density housing in downtowns and other transit-accessible neighborhoods — making it easy for residents to drive less or live without cars. The creation of more housing near BART stations could also have positive implications for public health; studies have consistently shown that physical inactivity is linked to obesity and other chronic health problems, and that when people live near public transit, they walk and bike more, and their physical and mental health improves.

Smart growth and urban planning that discourages car use can also boost local economies, given that small businesses and retail districts benefit when more people walk and bike to stores and restaurants. In the East Bay, high-density development could also help address the current housing crisis — in which the existing supply has greatly failed to meet regional demands.

What's more, sprawl and poor access to public transit in a city like Oakland drives up people's cost of living because they're forced to own, maintain, and drive cars. After housing costs, transportation is the second largest expense for Bay Area households, eating up an average of 27 percent of incomes, according to the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), the Bay Area's transit planning agency. Most of those expenses are related to auto ownership.

Supporters of new developments near transit also note that there is significant data demonstrating the huge demand for this type of housing. For starters, demographic data has shown that many Bay Area residents are using their cars less. In Oakland in 2013, according to the latest American Community Survey data, more than 45,000 people took public transit, walked, or biked to work — about 25 percent of the working population. That rate has climbed since 2009 when 43,000 people (23 percent of workers) biked, walked, or took transit. The Census data further showed that nearly 14,000 Oakland commuters said they had no access to a vehicle in 2013.

According to statistics from the Center for Transit-Oriented Development, which analyzes demographic trends related to public transportation, car ownership rates are dramatically lower for households within a half-mile radius of BART stations — 70 percent have zero or one vehicle. For households within a half-mile of the San Francisco Bay Ferry, which stops in Oakland and Alameda, 87 percent have one car or less.

The MTC's research has further found that significant numbers of Bay Area residents want to live near transit; a 2010 survey of 900 people concluded that two of the top factors people consider when choosing where to live are convenience for walking and biking and having a short commute to work. And MTC found that 38 percent of respondents said they would be

interested in living in a transit-oriented development. This group included low-income families with low car ownership rates, households with two incomes and no children, students, and younger, well-educated residents.

"Among the millennials, more of them are deciding they would rather have other things besides a car," explained Valerie Knepper, MTC's regional parking initiative manager. "They would prefer not to pay for parking or driving expenses."

While a number of recently adopted California and Oakland climate change policies are aimed broadly at supporting housing developments that accommodate alternative modes of transit and reduce car travel and emissions, one area in which policy has lagged substantially is the parking requirements for new projects, critics say.

Although parking policy often takes a back seat in debates over global warming, transportation, housing, and gentrification, urban planning experts say that the way governments decide where cars must be stationed and how much drivers pay for spaces can in many ways determine the long-term health and sustainability of a city. In Oakland, that means the ripple effect of reforms in parking policy could be profound — which is why a group of environmentalists are devoting their energy to changing it.

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Madison Park Financial Corporation — currently the most active market-rate housing developer in Oakland — has tripled the amount of bike parking in its apartment buildings over the last decade. "A lot of tenants prefer a certain lifestyle ... and would not have a car if they could avoid it," said Simon Chen, chief financial officer of Madison Park, which is headquartered by Lake Merritt.

This surge in demand for on-site bike parking appears to be a reflection of the increasing number of Oakland residents who want to drive less or live car-free — and Madison Park has worked hard to attract and accommodate these renters, Chen said. But he added that traditional neighborhood concerns about parking have not changed, so Madison Park continues to build the same — relatively large — amount of car parking spaces in its new buildings.

The problem is that Oakland residents who live near Madison Park's proposed projects demand that the company build a substantial amount of off-street parking for tenants. "They want as much parking as humanly possible," Chen said.

The conventional not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) fear from residents, and sometimes from businesses, is that developers will fail to build a big enough on-site garage, and that parking on adjacent streets will quickly become crowded and impossible to find. The thinking goes that without enough off-street parking in new buildings, residents who have lived in the area longer — and possibly shoppers or diners in a commercial district — will have to drive around in circles looking for spots, making the neighborhood less desirable.

Developers say these cries from residents for large amounts of new parking remain loud and influential — despite policymakers' stated interest in promoting alternative modes of transit. It's also despite the fact that experts have repeatedly argued that people's perceptions about parking shortages are usually wrong and that building huge garages in apartment buildings often does little to address on-street parking problems.

"It's just a constant struggle," Chen said. Ultimately, Madison Park relies on the Oakland Planning Code when determining how many parking spaces to build. Other developers — who also fear controversy and backlash — do the same, choosing simply to rely on the guidelines written into the municipal policies. That's why advocates say the codes are so important: They shape the city.

Like many municipalities in the United States, Oakland has long had minimum parking requirements for new developments — meaning every time developers propose projects, they must agree to build a certain amount of parking spaces on site. The city first adopted parking regulations in 1960 for new apartment buildings — and those rules largely remain intact today, resulting in a huge amount of parking.

"Every city in the region, including those that have been increasingly thoughtful about their parking codes, still have portions of their code trapped in 1950," said Jeffrey Tumlin, principal at Nelson/Nygaard, a San Francisco consulting firm that has helped cities develop innovative parking strategies.

While Oakland's parking code is fairly complex — the requirements change depending on the neighborhood and specific zoning regulations — for many new apartment buildings, the minimum parking required is one space per unit. As such, a developer who wants to construct a fifty-unit building must first consider if he or she can also build a fifty-car garage or lot.

There are some notable exceptions for which the city requires more parking. The city mandates that single-family homes in residential areas have two off-street parking spaces. Additionally, there are also higher parking minimums in select areas where there are specific concerns about on-street parking congestion. In these zones (such as the Adams Point neighborhood along Grand Avenue and Lake Merritt), the city essentially requires developers to build two spaces for two-bedroom apartments, meaning some buildings may have closer to a 2-1 parking ratio.

On the flip side, the city's parking code allows for lower minimums in a few areas — mainly in areas surrounding BART stations. For example, in the streets immediately adjacent to the West Oakland, MacArthur, and Fruitvale BART stations, developers can build one space for every two units. And by Lake Merritt BART station, apartment buildings can have three-quarters of a space for every unit.

In recent years, the city has allowed residential developers in some commercial districts and along specific transit corridors to go below the standard one-space per-unit minimum if they apply for special approvals known as "conditional use permits." Though this process, developers can in some cases go as low as one space for every two units (half of what is required) if they effectively can demonstrate that it's feasible to provide less parking. In select areas, there are also opportunities for developers to do reduced parking if they're building affordable housing.

However, Oakland's parking system is still rooted in policies that overly value car ownership. Critics note that developers have to proactively seek parking exemptions, which, in turn, tends to increase the intensity of the parking backlash because developers are forced to publicly request to bypass city rules.

As a result, developers continue to build a lot of parking in Oakland. A review of recently completed residential developments in the city — along with proposed projects in the works — reveals that many projects have built or are on track to build at least one parking spot per unit. Across seven new apartment buildings completed in 2014, developers built a total of 382 parking spaces for 392 housing units. The slightly lower than one-to-one ratio was a result of a 33-unit senior housing project that included only 17 parking spaces (since senior housing projects typically have only one space per four units). Three of the 2014 projects — including two Madison Park buildings in West Oakland — built exactly one space per unit. Two new buildings in East Oakland built more parking spaces than their total units; a 32-unit project included 40 spaces, and a 12-unit project had 22 spaces.

"We target, almost by default, the minimum requirement," said Chen from Madison Park, noting that the company has four more projects underway that will all have at least one space per unit. One of the projects under construction on Adeline and 39th streets (on the border of West Oakland and Emeryville) will have 109 parking spaces for 101 residential units and a cafe. And according to Chen, three other proposed Madison Park projects — two in West Oakland, and another in Jingletown near Fruitvale BART station — will bring about 230 units total to Oakland and at least 230 new parking spaces.

AvéVista, a 68-unit project under construction at 460 Grand Avenue in the Adams Point neighborhood — where parking requirements are particularly high — will include 97 parking spaces, according to Joe McCarthy, senior project manager with BRIDGE Housing, a nonprofit developer. In other neighborhoods and cities, BRIDGE has launched progressive projects with limited parking, including a major mixed-used development adjacent to MacArthur BART. But at 460 Grand, due to Oakland's strict code requirements, BRIDGE had to provide nearly one hundred spots, McCarthy said.

While the number of parking spots built and proposed in these recent projects may seem standard — and while some residents will continue to argue that it's not enough — research on the existing housing and parking in Oakland shows that the city already has way too much off-street parking. In fact, one analysis by TransForm reveals that millions of dollars have been wasted on unused parking in just a dozen or so buildings in Oakland. And if development rules and trends don't change, the amount of money and land Oakland wastes on parking in the coming decades will be astronomical.

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By 2040, Oakland is projected to create roughly 51,000 new housing units — a 30 percent growth from the city's current stock, according to forecasts published by the Association of Bay Area Governments and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

Using that projection, Cheng from TransForm last year did a rough calculation estimating the amount of new parking the housing developments could bring to Oakland if the city's requirements and development parking trends stayed the same. By 2040, she found, Oakland could have more than 64,000 new off-street parking spaces — costing developers a total of \$2.5 billion.

But TransForm's data on the high vacancy rates in existing Oakland apartment building lots and garages suggests that a significant portion of that \$2.5 billion would be wasted on empty spots. As part of its efforts to push developers to reduce their parking, TransForm has published a [parking database](#) that currently includes statistics from nearly seventy Bay Area

buildings. Across fourteen Oakland buildings that agreed to provide data and grant access to TransForm (which did interviews and nighttime visits to garages), an average of 27 percent of parking spaces were unused. That correlates to roughly 133,200 square feet of wasted space and unnecessary expenditures of \$22 million in construction costs. Other Oakland apartment buildings likely have significantly higher parking vacancy rates, given that many of the database participants have worked with TransForm and have relatively more progressive plans (meaning fewer than one space per unit).

The city's own parking surveys revealed similar findings. In 2013, data from seven apartment buildings — in the Jack London and Fruitvale districts and along Telegraph Avenue — found that an average of 31 percent of on-site spaces were unoccupied.

Using estimates from a 2013 Seattle study on the hidden fees landlords implement to regain losses for unused parking, Cheng estimated that tenants in the 51,000 new units to be built in Oakland in the next two decades could face a total of \$144 million in additional rent costs each year solely to subsidize excess car parking.

In 2008, TransForm launched its GreenTRIP program, which encourages greener building designs with less parking. Similar to the US Green Building Council's process of awarding sustainable buildings with Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certifications, GreenTRIP recognizes forward-thinking residential parking strategies based on rigorous criteria. The specific standards differ by location — with stricter metrics in San Francisco than Petaluma, for example — but in downtown Oakland, projects can earn GreenTRIP certification if they do not go above 0.75 parking spaces per unit, and if the projected vehicle miles traveled per day per household does not exceed 25 miles. The average Bay Area household drives 50 miles per day.

Additionally, projects must adopt specific "traffic reduction strategies," such as providing free annual memberships to car-share services (such as ZipCar or City CarShare) and free or discounted public transit passes.

Most GreenTRIP buildings also offer what is called "unbundled parking," a pricing policy that separates the cost of parking from the rent or home purchase price. That means residents who want a parking spot have to pay extra for it while those who don't own cars get more affordable units. As opposed to the conventional system — in which parking is automatically included in rent and thus all residents subsidize the costs of the on-site garage and are incentivized to own a car — unbundled parking can go a long way toward encouraging people to live car-free.

"The concept is let's house people and [build] places for people rather than provide free housing for cars," said Cheng.

GreenTRIP staffers also help developers design their traffic reduction strategies and navigate the process of getting city approvals — in some cases by providing compelling evidence of the environmental and social benefits of reduced parking and transit perks. After five years, GreenTRIP has gathered a lot of data to make a convincing case. Across eighteen projects that have earned GreenTRIP certification, TransForm estimates that residents in these buildings cumulatively drive 85,500 fewer miles per day than the state average and release 15,000 fewer tons of carbon dioxide per year.

At 4700 Telegraph, the Nautilus Group project in Temescal and GreenTRIP's first certification in Oakland, TransForm staffers estimate that residents will drive fifteen miles per day per unit — 70 percent lower than the Bay Area average, and thus will produce 62 percent fewer greenhouse gas emissions than the regional standard.

TransForm has also collected anecdotal evidence illustrating the clear connection between greener parking plans and affordable housing. In the Riviera Family Apartments, a GreenTRIP-certified affordable housing project located a short walk from the Walnut Creek BART station, a reduction in parking allowed for the construction of substantially more affordable units. Under the local parking code requirements, the nonprofit developer, Resources for Community Development, would have been forced to build 79 parking spaces for only 36 affordable homes.

But following GreenTRIP guidelines, the developer gained approval for a proposal that decreased the parking to 50 spaces and increased the housing to 58 homes. That meant a 61 percent increase in the number of affordable units — a greener and more equitable plan that was financially feasible because the developer was able to significantly reduce parking construction costs.

Garden Village, a 77-unit Nautilus Group project near UC Berkeley, features no on-site parking. Instead, Nautilus provided transit passes, car-share memberships, extensive bike parking, a cycling fix-it station, grocery carts for every unit (making shopping much easier), and other creative amenities that support alternative transit. That project also featured 10 percent affordable units. Laub, the company's vice president, said that if Nautilus were forced to build on-site parking for the project (which was also GreenTRIP-certified), it could not have built any affordable housing.

On a larger scale, if the roughly 51,000 units of new housing forecasted to be built in Oakland over the next 25 years adopted GreenTRIP-style parking plans the benefits would be huge. According to TransForm's projections, developers would build 28,000 fewer parking spots under GreenTRIP guidelines — a 44 percent reduction from the parking that would be built under current code.

This model would result in huge reductions in pollution; Cheng estimated that residents of the city's projected new housing units would emit a total of 250 fewer tons of greenhouse gases per day if future developments followed GreenTRIP formulas for limited parking.

Yet while some developers and city leaders are starting to see the incredible potential for greener and more affordable projects, transportation advocates question whether local governments are willing to make reduced parking the norm instead of the exception.

In the coming months, the City of Oakland is, in fact, scheduled to rewrite its parking policies for new developments. It's a rare chance to shape the future of Oakland, and transportation activists hope that city officials will seize the opportunity to lay the groundwork for sustainable and equitable development. After all, the stakes are high.

Policies that proactively promote alternative modes of transit can actually change people's behavior. Separated bike lanes, for example, attract new cyclists to the road. Pedestrian plazas with lots of public seating draw visitors and shoppers. And policies that make it harder or more expensive to drive can lead to a reduction in car trips.

On the flip side, apartment buildings with free on-site parking spaces attract car owners to neighborhoods — even in locations where driving is unnecessary. Liz Brisson, co-founder of local advocacy group Transport Oakland and a transportation planner who works in San Francisco, explained it this way in a recent email to Oakland's planning commissioners urging them to approve the reduced parking for 4700 Telegraph, Nautilus' Temescal project: "If you build it, people who own cars will come. If you don't build it, it will be too much of a pain to own a car, and people will choose other ways to get around."

That latter point is critical when considering how to create progressive parking policies, experts say. And while it may seem obvious that less parking will lead to less driving, that thinking is largely absent from policies and local planning processes. Instead, policymakers (who write, study, and rewrite parking requirements) and planning commissioners and elected officials (who decide whether to approve development proposals) tend to assume that less parking simply means more traffic. As a result, transportation policies and development approval decisions are often geared toward accommodating existing rates of driving, which, in turn, not only maintain or increase current levels of pollution and greenhouse gases, but also keep housing prices unnecessarily high.

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"In order for us to actually build the communities that we want to see, we need to limit the amount of parking that is going to occur in those communities," said Wade Wietgreffe, a senior planner with the San Francisco Planning Department. Referencing a quote from a former director of his agency, he added: "No great city is known for its parking availability."

In other words, if Oakland wants to be a true leader in progressive parking policies, it's not enough for the city to acknowledge that it's currently forcing developers to build too much parking and adjust the requirements accordingly. While that would be a productive first step, advocates said Oakland should be much more aggressive by adopting policies that push developers to build a city with significantly fewer cars per capita. That means helping Oakland grow without increasing the number of cars driving and parking here.

The San Francisco Planning Department, the San Francisco Municipal Transit Agency, and San Francisco County Transportation Authority will soon publish the results of a study of off-street parking in residential and commercial properties showing that when there are more parking spaces available, more people choose to drive, according to Wietgreffe. "Parking supply affects vehicle behavior," he said.

Transportation advocates point out that city officials with conventional, car-centric views tend to overlook the fact that parking requirements can block developers from building projects with less parking and force sustainably minded people to pay rents that are steeper than necessary and oftentimes higher than they can afford. As such, outdated parking minimums interfere with consumers' increasing desire to live green lifestyles — and developers' growing interest in accommodating them.

Experts further note that parking minimums can block the creation of housing altogether. With the high costs of building huge amounts of parking, some developers will reduce the size of their projects or completely abandon them. This can be especially problematic during economic downturns when unnecessarily high parking minimums can prompt developers to build housing that prices out struggling low-income renters.

That's why, some experts say, one obvious way for cities to make their required parking ratios more environmentally friendly is to get rid of them. "The absolute best practice is to simply not have parking requirements," said Michael Manville, an assistant professor of city and regional planning at Cornell University who has written about how parking requirements create barriers to housing development.

When cities deregulate off-street parking rules and scrap outdated minimums, developers tend to build fewer parking spots, he said. "That's a pretty clear sign the government was making them provide more parking than they thought they needed to sell their units." He added of existing minimum laws: "A non-trivial portion of the population doesn't own a car. You're basically telling developers they can't build housing explicitly for those people."

Some European cities abolished parking minimums for developments long ago and in some cases replaced them with maximums. After London scrapped minimums in 2004 and instituted maximums, the parking supply shrank by about 40 percent, according to a New York University study of hundreds of developments. Last month, the Minneapolis City Council voted to eliminate its one-space per-unit requirement for many new buildings — a proposal driven by a desire to reduce housing costs.

San Francisco, Seattle, Portland, and New York City have all, in various ways, eliminated parking minimums in neighborhoods with good transit access. Since Seattle eliminated parking minimums in many of its denser urban areas, 52 project proposals have included no parking whatsoever, according to Gordon Clowers, a senior planner for that city. And although 167 projects still chose to build some parking, the average across new developments was 0.55 spaces per unit — well below the one-space per-unit minimum that had previously been the standard. This data corroborates the idea that developers want to build less parking than what city governments have long mandated — and that eliminating minimums can have a huge impact on creating greener cities.

And if a lower supply of off-street spaces ends up creating parking problems in surrounding neighborhoods, there are creative ways cities can and should fix on-street parking, Manville said. In fact, urban planning experts note that, contrary to popular belief, overcrowding in on-street parking is typically the result of poor management policies — and not a lack of parking in nearby residential garages.

Consider the fact so many garage spaces sit vacant. "Increasing your supply of empty off-street spaces does nothing to improve the availability of on-street parking," said Tumlin, the Nelson/Nygaard consultant.

Increasingly, cities are relying on market-based pricing for parking, which means that prices are based on demand. In areas where there is high demand, such as a busy retail corridor in which parking spaces are often occupied, meter prices should be higher to encourage turnover and ensure that there are a handful of spaces consistently available. And in places where there are frequently high vacancy rates and parking spots available, the prices should be lower to incentivize drivers to take advantage of that supply.

For example, MTC, the Bay Area's transportation planning agency, has found that in areas where there are perceived parking shortages — such as a commercial district that sees frequent double-parking — there are often parking garages or lots nearby with many empty spots, according to Knepper, MTC manager. If those garages were much cheaper (and well publicized) and the on-street meters were more expensive, then more cars would use the

garages and it would be easier for drivers to find short-term parking directly in front of a business.

Simply put, cities should be working to ensure that the available parking supply is used much more efficiently. And if cities incentivize drivers to take advantage of existing spaces, it could eliminate the traditional parking fears that result in developers wasting money and space on massive garages, and tenants paying much higher rent than necessary. For Oakland, that could mean more vibrant business districts, fewer empty parking lots, and more affordable housing.

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In Oakland, there are reasons to be optimistic about the potential for forward-thinking parking strategies. Mayor Libby Schaaf, when she was a councilmember, spearheaded a pilot program that tested the city's first-ever market-based parking program in Montclair. The goal was to set meter rates based on demand so that it would be easier for shoppers to find parking spots on popular streets.

The pilot also made an underutilized garage in the district free for the first twenty minutes — aimed at incentivizing drivers to choose these spaces. The neighborhood business association has endorsed the program, and the city recently applied for MTC grant money to expand this pricing strategy to other commercial districts.

Schaaf also hired the city's first-ever transportation policy director, Matt Nichols, who previously rolled out market-based parking policies in Berkeley where he formerly worked as a transportation planner. Nichols, who does not own a car, has been a champion of progressive parking policies and said in an interview that traditional minimum requirements for developments have created an excess of off-street parking and have blocked the creation of affordable housing. "It's a waste of money and a waste of land," he said.

Nichols and Schaaf also recently advocated for the passage of Assembly Bill 744, state legislation that would allow affordable housing developers to bypass parking requirements. In a letter expressing support for the bill, Schaaf said that helping developers create affordable housing is critical to solving the city's housing crisis — and that making it easier for them to build less parking could make a big difference.

Oakland's planning department, as part of a citywide zoning effort, is now in the process of rewriting its off-street parking requirements — regulations that the city has not comprehensively reviewed for the last fifty years. "Obviously, the thinking has changed a lot," said Neil Gray, city planner overseeing the parking code update, which will move forward in the coming months and eventually require city council approval.

While the department hasn't published a proposal yet, Gray said the city is looking to make it easier for new buildings to include less parking — so that in downtown and transit corridors, developers would no longer have to seek special exemptions to do greener and cheaper designs.

And Flynn, director of the planning department, said she recognizes that making it easier for people to park is not the key to building a better Oakland. "Nobody goes to Paris because it has a lot of parking," she said, adding, "When you provide a lot of [parking] and it's cheap,

you induce more driving. If we're trying to change lifestyles in terms of transportation choices, we have to decide what's more important to us. Is it just to make sure cars have easy access to parking?"