

Chicago Tribune

New parking policies driving transit-oriented development

Mary Ellen Podmolik | September 20, 2014

If you live in a walkable neighborhood, with easy access to public transportation, goods and services, how much do you need, or want, a car and a place to park it?

It's a question developers and residents are starting to ponder in some Chicago neighborhoods. Almost a year after the city passed an ordinance aimed at fostering transit-oriented development, projects are underway in a few communities and being talked about in many more.

Under the ordinance, residential developers can cut in half the number of off-street parking spaces they must include in their projects so long as the buildings are within 600 feet of a transit station, or within 1,200 feet of a street with a pedestrian designation. Any fewer number of spaces requires additional permission from the city.

Previously, the ordinance called for a 1-to-1 ratio of parking spots to housing. The ordinance not only cuts a developer's cost in terms of parking space development, but it enables a developer to devote more square footage to living space or unit count.

The Metropolitan Planning Council has long been involved in discussions surrounding transit-oriented development in suburban communities as well as the city of Chicago, and it is pleased to see a strong response to the ordinance by developers and by neighborhoods that are weighing in on their future.

In Logan Square, for instance, hundreds of residents have recently attended public workshops to discuss development ideas.

That's a great start, says Peter Skosey, a planning council executive vice president. He'd like to see the conversation expanded to other communities, not to create demand for mixed-use development where it doesn't exist, but to answer unserved demand in some neighborhoods.

Specifically, the council would like to start a conversation about the south leg of the CTA's Green Line, near the city's Bronzeville neighborhood and Illinois Institute of Technology.

When the community meetings are completed, the council plans to take what it has learned and turn it into some recommendations for the city that may include trimming the parking requirements even more.

"We do see, as more people are engaged in the process, a realization," Skosey said. "They don't want parking lots, they want green space, they want stores. Frankly, parking lots are ugly."

"If we continue to plan our cities around where we're going to put our cars and not where we're going to put our people, that's not a recipe for growth," he added.

Among the firms active in the movement is Brininstool + Lynch, which, so far, has designed transit-oriented residential developments in Chicago's Wicker Park and Logan Square neighborhoods.

Partner David Brininstool sees the ordinance generating developer interest in bringing downtownlike residential buildings into neighborhoods.

"There's a realization that there's a young professional renter who really wants to be in the neighborhoods," Brininstool said. "Not everyone wants to be in the core. People who really want to devote more hours to their careers than their personal lives are downtown."

Still, there are concerns about whether the concept can succeed only in neighborhoods most favored by millennials.

Transit Center, an independent philanthropic group that supports improvements in public transportation, surveyed consumers about what factors would prompt them to ride public transportation. Among people 30 and older, having stations closer to home and work ranked No. 2 on the list.

But the New York-based center also found that people older than 60, who may have grown up in more densely populated areas with access to transit, avoid public transportation, according to its recently released report.

Those kinds of findings may limit, at least initially, transit-oriented development to certain neighborhoods, though there is anecdotal evidence that baby boomers are staying in cities longer or moving back once they become empty nesters.

"Developers are going to do what they think the market wants," Brininstool said. "They generally don't lead, they follow. You start to get a little beyond the hipster renter, to a more conventional renter, and it's true. Right now, those neighborhoods aren't quite as pedestrian."