The Suburb That Tried To Kill the Car

T.R. Goldman | October 22, 2015

Evanston was failing as a suburb, so it reinvented itself as a mini city. Now the city of Chicago wants to follow its lead.

Mark Peterson/Redux Pictures for Politico Magazine

Like any bureaucratic invention, zoning regulations often take on a life of their own, growing and multiplying in complexity, and then calcifying into rigid, prescriptive formulas for each zoning district that dictate everything from land use to the size of the building to how far it must be set back from the road to the amount of parking that must be provided. And it's these rigidities that have often made TOD's high-rise, mixed-use, parking-light prerequisites a nonstarter in communities that might otherwise benefit from TOD's added downtown vitality and tax revenue.

That attitude, however, is shifting, says Damir Latinovic, Evanston's planning and zoning administrator. Zoning originally started as a way to "separate nuisances" from the general population, he explained, and so naturally led to proscriptive requirements—the more detailed the better—about what was considered incompatible with a particular district.

Now, he says, the emphasis tends to be more on how well the design itself actually works, and less on its specific purpose or use, that is, to actually look at a project's impact on "the public realm, the street, the livable environment."

"People have realized that if you say a particular use is not allowed somewhere, well, maybe that particular use can operate in a manner that's not a nuisance," he explains. "Take a grocery store, you have the impact of the hours of operation, the truck deliveries, the surrounding illumination. But what if there was a smaller grocery store on a corner in a residential area.

"There's been a shift in the population which has triggered the need for mixed-use districts," he added, "so the needs of millennials with young families, and retiring baby boomers—we definitely keep that in mind."

In Evanston, for example, projects over 20,000 square feet are considered a "planned unit development," which gives city officials the ability to trade off a developer's wishes to build taller or with fewer setbacks in exchange for wringing the most "public benefit" from a project—from public art to a LEED silver building to a plaza or car-share spot. And there's no fixed formula, just a guideline that tries to mirror a community's downtown development plan, in Evanston's case, one that was put together in 2009.

"The developers, they know their bottom line, and they'll propose something that makes financial sense," says Latinovic. "But we're trying to get as many public benefits as possible. Are you contributing to the bike share program, are you beautifying an underpass?"

Michael McLean, a transit oriented developer who is developing a project in Evanston, is shown here in his office in Chicago. McLean admits that he does have a car but for a good reason: "I am currently driving due having to drop my son off at school in the morning." | Mark Peterson / Redux Pictures for Politico Magazine

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Embracing a new vision for Evanston also meant tackling head-on the suburbs' love affair with a car-centric view of daily life. Evanston's normal zoning ordinances, for example, call for 1.25 parking spaces per studio apartment, 1.5 spots for a two-bedroom apartment, and two spots for a three-bedroom unit. Those requirements are generally way too high for a transit-oriented neighborhood, which by definition is designed to make a car redundant, with its access to mass transit for commuting and plenty of retail on the ground floor of high-rise residences.

Mandatory parking minimums also wreak havoc on architectural design and can hinder the very street life necessary for a high-density neighborhood. "To build a gigantic parking garage on a flag lot would have created a five-story bunker that would have killed the street, it would have been dark and cold had no life on it whatsoever," says Evanston-area developer Michael McLean, referring to the L-shaped lot of his project, 1571 Maple Ave., which includes just 12 on-site parking spots.

Evanston's willingness to abandon its tight parking restrictions to facilitate the growth around the transit hubs is working: Ownership of one car or none within half a mile of Evanston's downtown "L" and commuter rail stops was 80 percent in 2009 compared with 47 percent for all of Evanston. "In our region, all kinds of suburbs want to be Evanston," says Kyle Smith, a TOD specialist at Chicago's nonprofit Center for Neighborhood Technology. "All of Evanston's neighbors look jealously and say 'I want a Trader Joe's, I want jobs, I want that walkable downtown.'"

Constructing parking is not only bad for developers and urban planners, but it raises rents and prices for residents as well. Each parking "stall" in a so-called "structured" multistory building can cost anywhere from $20,000 to $50,000—the spot costs more to build than buying the car—and can add as much as 20 percent to the rental price.

A study completed this summer, called "Right Size Parking" and led by Washington state's King County public transit authority, found that the county was significantly "over-parked"—multifamily buildings there had 40 percent more parking spots than were actually being used. How was this information determined? By actually counting the number of cars parked at 223 multifamily properties on three weeknights between midnight and 5 a.m., the presumed "peak parking" hours when the maximum number of spaces would be in use.

And overparking is a very big deal, especially in the context of TOD. "Parking is the literal intersection between transportation and land use," explains Daniel Rowe, who oversaw the three-year project for King County Transit. "And the whole concept of TOD is providing land use that is supportive of transit. So to get TOD right, you have to get the parking right."

Because parking stalls are so expensive to build, and the extra land they require so expensive to buy, they can both increase the cost of rent while commensurately reducing the availability of affordable housing. Developers usually don't want to manage parking lots, so when there are too many spaces, tenants or condo owners will often be offered an extra space or two when they move in, he explains. And that, urban planners say, leads to

unintended effects on people's auto ownership rates—give people a place to park their car and they'll get a car, or keep the one they have.

Eliminating mandatory parking minimums was a key step to tackling Evanston's love affair with car-centric transportation. | Mark Peterson/Redux Pictures for Politico Magazine

Rowe and his team set out to find a more precise way to measure parking needs, one that was closer to reality than more general categories found in the Institute of Transportation Engineers' less-than-scientific *Parking Generation* manual, which assigns parking requirements based only on land-use, and uses a loosely drawn sample at that.

"We decided that if anything will ever change, we needed good solid science," Rowe says. "So we used very robust methods. Instead of relying on property managers we sent people out to do the counts."

The result was a model that looked at seven variables—"localized contextual information," says Rowe—from the average cost of rent and parking to frequency of transit. It found, perhaps not surprisingly, that the amount of transit and density of development were the two most important factors determining the number of parking spots needed. The variables Rowe's team collected were plugged into a new equation that looks like gibberish (to the nonmathematically inclined) but might represent one of the biggest breakthroughs in revitalizing urban and suburban cores.

That equation produces a far more sophisticated estimate of a specific project's individual parking needs. For people living in central business districts, for example, parking requirements can drop to as low as one car for every two units, while in the suburbs, the ratio is more than double that figure. And the project included the creation of a Web tool—a residential parking calculator—to help developers and planners more precisely plot their parking needs.