

We Need to Try a Different Approach

Comments on Parking Reimagined: Parking and Loading Staff Report dtd 12 Jul 2023
For Planning Commission Hearing Scheduled for 26 July 2023

Board of Mason District Council of Community Associations
3127 Juniper Lane
Falls Church, VA 22044

Mason District Council recommends an approach different from the current course whereby the Board is likely to impose ill-conceived, unsubstantiated parking regulations on residents. In particular, we recommend that the county community simply work together. Together, residents, developers, and county officials can prosper. The current approach of the Board systematically undermining community protections in the zoning ordinance is the road to disaster.

In a recent hearing, Supervisor Lusk emphasized the importance of Fairfax County remaining attractive for developers' investments. There is no disagreement with his assertion. Investments by developers are essential protection against derelict neighborhoods. But alarmingly, beyond Supervisor Lusk's sound advice lies an apparent conviction among supervisors that the necessary price of developers' investments is systematic dismantling of zoning ordinance provisions that protect our communities. We see evidence in the 2016 Gartner report and the 2019 strategy for the county's economic success. We see it also in the new zMOD ordinance, which deleted the requirement for P districts to taper down in bulk where they abut conventional residential districts, and we see it a second time in zMOD where it deleted the requirement for open space in cluster subdivisions to in fact be OPEN. Now the Board is dismantling parking regulations. And waiting in the wings, landscaping and screening. These rollbacks clearly profit developers, but they should not be accepted by residents where they jeopardize quality of life in our residential districts.

While developers are essential elements of the county community, county government exists first and foremost to serve, not the interests of developers, but the rights and interests of residents. And the zoning ordinance exists to protect residents and their homes from incompatible development. The challenge in land use management is to effectively balance the quality of life for residents with the financial interests of developers.

The objectives of parking regulations are easy to state. We want parking that provides the spaces site users require and protects adjacent properties from overflow. And over-parked sites should be avoided because they damage the environment and waste development resources. Objectives are easy, but writing parking regulations is difficult for two principal reasons. First, right-sized parking is notoriously site dependent. Parking capacity appropriate for two similar multi-family developments in the same suburban center can differ widely. Secondly, parking is forever. If a

new development provides too little parking capacity, the adjacent residential districts will suffer the overflow for the indefinite future.

Unfortunately, one cannot have confidence in the new parking minimums proposed in the staff report. Parking utilization data collected in Fairfax County and documented on the Parking Reimagined Web site to support the new regulations was limited to two shopping malls and a one-week effort at 10 multifamily developments. Page 8 of the staff report mentions two additional data collection efforts, one at 14 drive-through restaurants and the second at one or more “standalone pharmacies,” both efforts presumably by staff. Only the shopping-mall data collection resulted in a specific recommendation for a new parking standard. With no more data than this, the staff report proposes to revise parking requirements for nearly all land uses in virtually every planning area.

The proposed regulations are simply specious. The staff report offers superficial narratives in an effort to explain the changes, but, in fact, save shopping malls, the revisions are entirely unsubstantiated. Furthermore, nothing in the staff report addresses the downside. What is the likelihood that the reduced minimums will generate overflow parking in adjacent residential neighborhoods, and how would overflow be managed? Residents would be foolish to accept the proposal. It seriously jeopardizes life in residential districts.

We need to try a different approach, one that effectively and efficiently engages affected residents. Residents are the experts on their neighborhoods. They understand the parking situation in their communities and how parking for a new development can be accommodated.

As an alternative to the proposed parking minimums, it is easy to envision a Fairfax County where residents, developers, and officials have learned to work together:

- Where supervisors have Land Use Committees,
- Where every Land Use Committee solicits a voting member from every civic association and HOA in the magisterial district,
- Where developers work out parking issues with the respective Land Use Committee,
- Where the Land Use Committee produces a concise written recommendation regarding the issues presented, including recommended means for protecting the community from overflow parking such as residential parking districts, formal parking agreements, and Transportation Demand Management programs,
- Where the planning commissioner and the district supervisor comment in writing on the Land Use Committee report,
- Where the report and the officials’ comments are published in the staff report and taken into consideration in hearings, and
- Where the county is capable of enforcing provisions protecting residential districts including residential parking district regulations.

This is the solution we need.

In the meantime, the proposed parking regulations should not be adopted. They are poorly conceived and unsubstantiated. They jeopardize the homes and welfare of residents.

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