

Small Lot Parking Exemption Focus Group Summary



Wednesday February 11, 2015

Denver Community Credit Union – 1041 Acoma

Session Overview

The Department of Community Planning and Development (CPD) and Denver City Councilwoman Jeanne Robb hosted a focus group session to discuss Denver's citywide parking exemption for small zone lots in mixed use commercial zone districts and explore options for revising the exemption. Focus group participants offered insights and suggestions on how the City can continue to foster a vibrant community and implement adopted plans and policies. Participant comments and feedback are summarized on the following pages.

The City invited specific stakeholders from a variety of neighborhoods, professions, and organizations to participate in the focus group, including registered neighborhood organizations, affordable housing advocates, business owners, business improvement districts, developers, attorneys, and bankers. Ten such stakeholders attended the session.

The City also invited the public to attend the session through an email to Inter-Neighborhood Cooperation Zoning and Planning Committee and all registered neighborhood organizations, as well as a posting on the City's web site and notice in the City Council District 10 e-Talk newsletter. Over twenty members of the general public attended the session.

The session began with a presentation by city planners and Councilwoman Robb on the history of the small lot parking exemption, what we've heard from the community, and an analysis of potential approaches. The presentation was followed by an interactive discussion.

The Existing Parking Exemption for Small Lots

The Denver Zoning Code exempts small lots (6,250 square feet and smaller as of June 25, 2010) in mixed-use commercial zone districts from providing off-street parking. The intent of this exemption is to provide flexibility for small lots and encourage reuse of existing buildings in limited areas of the city.

Session Outcome

Focus group discussion identified the need to take a more targeted geographic approach and to better understand evolving parking dynamics, especially with regard to small or affordable housing units and multi-modal transportation. Given that discussion and the request for more data, Councilwoman Robb and the Department of Community Planning and Development agree that more work and evaluation are needed before Denver Zoning Code changes are proposed. Next steps include:

- tracking and monitoring new small lot investment in mixed use commercial districts, especially above three stories,
- continuing to collect data regarding trends and development patterns, particularly in regard to car ownership, and
- using the information and data on small lot redevelopment and parking to inform the upcoming update of the Blueprint Denver citywide land use and transportation plan, as well as ongoing neighborhood plans

Discussion Summary

Focus group participants discussed challenges, opportunities, and potential options with regard to the existing small lot parking exemption. Their comments are summarized below.

- **General Comments**
 - Amending the small lot parking exemption should not be tied to micro housing—small lots should be developed as the highest and best use.
 - The market should determine the amount of parking that should be provided.
 - The existing small lot parking exemption is attractive for creating urban density.
 - Over parking a site should be avoided.
 - Shared parking should be encouraged.
 - Many people still own cars and will park on the street if parking is not provided.
 - Lenders may not often finance projects with low parking provision.
 - The proposed three-story small lot parking exemption is a good compromise.
 - The exemption should continue to be researched and examined, but there is also a sense of urgency with potential new projects.
 - When small lots are assembled, larger projects are built, resulting in more car ownership.
 - The small lot parking exemption encourages reinvestment as seen in the building permit data.
 - High parking requirements hinder development.
 - Parking requirements should be based on the number of bedrooms, not the number of units.
 - Parking requirements for development are disconnected from parking management.

- **Comments on Affordability/Flexibility**
 - New lifestyle trends are resulting in less car ownership.
 - Affordability can be increased without the expense of parking.
 - Low income populations have lower rates of car ownership.
 - Off-site parking for those who own cars can increase affordability. People who own the cars pay for the parking, not everyone.
 - Affordable housing should be a criteria when considering parking exemptions.
 - Affordability should continue to be incentivized.
 - Flexibility is important when considering parking exemptions, but the standards should be objective.
- **Comments on Relationship to Transportation/Transit**
 - There are 30 micro housing projects without parking in Seattle’s “Urban Transportation Area.”
 - Do we know for certain that small lot residential development leads to lower car use?
 - 10% of residents in micro housing projects in Seattle’s high-transit areas own cars, while 20% of micro housing residents in Seattle’s lower-transit areas own cars.
 - Higher density development supports multimodal transportation.
 - Parking should be totally exempted when adjacent to transit, like in the current Main Street districts.
 - Parking exemptions should be location-driven so that density is concentrated near quality transportation. The exemption could be expanded to larger lots if they are in the appropriate locations.
 - The “Enhanced Transit Corridors” in Blueprint Denver may not be the best indicator of transportation accessibility.
- **Comments on Relationship to Area/Neighborhood**
 - Neighborhoods without parking problems will be the best location for viable micro housing projects. They should also be located near higher densities and multimodal transportation.
 - The small lot parking exemption should be geographically based. It makes sense on Colfax, but not in other areas of the city.
 - The small lot parking exemption should be granted through evaluation criteria including the availability of on-street parking, access to public transit, transportation alternatives, and other location-based criteria.
 - Parking should be exempted when a property is near amenities regardless of lot size.
 - Could consider expanding the exemption to larger lots based upon the specific location.
 - Parking exemptions should be tailored to the context.
 - Parking exemptions should be sensitive to the location.

- The size of a residential unit, transportation access, and parking availability should be considered when granting the exemption.
- **Comments on Data and Evaluation**
 - Better data on parking trends is needed.
 - There is a need for additional data collection and analysis to understand development trends.
 - There is a lot of uncertainty without concrete data.
 - It's difficult to develop evaluation criteria that work in every situation.

Comment Card Summary

Eight participants submitted comment cards with individual feedback on the small lot parking exemption and session discussion. Their comments are summarized below.

- **General Comments**
 - The current rules should not be changed to require more parking.
 - The small lot exemption allows for innovation that will keep Denver vibrant.
 - It would be unfair to remove the parking exemption, considering that some property owners bought lots because of the exemption.
- **Comments on Affordability/Flexibility**
 - Incentivizing a diversity of housing options is more important than parking availability on streets.
 - Parking is expensive. If we can lower development costs by eliminating requirements where parking is not necessary, we can build more affordable housing.
 - Parking requirements increase development costs and lead to underutilization of limited land.
- **Comments on Relationship to Transportation/Transit**
 - Don't build a city for cars, build it for people.
 - Adding parking trains people to drive. Removing parking trains them to seek alternatives.
 - Transportation should start to change now (RTD, bike share, care share, etc.)
 - Barriers to redevelopment of small lots could lower transit ridership that will address long-term parking issues.
- **Comments on Relationship to Area/Neighborhood**
 - Parking exemptions should not be based solely on lot size. Individual areas/neighborhoods are important to consider.
 - The Cherry Creek BID would like to see no changes in the small lot exemption developed by consensus during the Cherry Creek North zoning process.
- **Comments on Process**
 - The invited focus group participants are mostly powerful people from Country Club and Cherry Creek. They don't represent RiNo, Five Points or Curtis Park.
 - Need a millennial among the invited focus group participants.