

PHILADELPHIA CITY PLANNING COMMISSION CENTER CITY PARKING POLICY STATEMENT

Center City Philadelphia is experiencing a period of significant growth and economic investment. This area's pedestrian-friendly environment, human-scaled streets and buildings, and its premier historic resources all contribute to Center City's desirability as a place to live, work, and visit. With this growth has come the need to treat parking in ways that limit the impacts of increased driving and vehicle storage on the viability of public transit, downtown walkability, traffic congestion and air pollution, and the historic and architectural qualities that make Center City Philadelphia so attractive.

In order to support Center City's continued development as a vibrant, healthy, and attractive downtown, an integrated and balanced transportation system is needed. This system should encourage the use of public transit, accommodate private automobiles, provide less congested and safer streets for vehicular, bicyclist, and pedestrian movement, offer sufficient automobile parking options, and encourage the use of technology to better manage these components.

1. **Design Controls for Parking Facilities.** The parking design controls incorporated in the C4 and C5 districts of the Zoning Code in 1991 included restrictions on the location of parking facilities and their driveways; limits on the size of garages south of Chestnut Street; required façade reviews for parking structures and landscaping for surface parking lots, and mandated retail uses on the ground floor of parking structures. The purpose of these regulations was to reduce the negative impacts of new parking facilities on the streetscape and the pedestrian environment. However, as Center City development – particularly the residential sector – has continued to grow, so have expectations for a high quality urban environment. Automobile parking is a service function, and should be treated accordingly. It is time to improve and strengthen the regulations that affect parking structure design and development. In addition, the landscaping requirement for surface parking lots has not proven effective, partly because many lots are too small to accommodate landscaping along with an efficient layout of parking spaces, and partly because maintenance has been lacking.

Incentives should be added to the Zoning Code to encourage developers to provide parking that is built below-grade or “wrapped” within the building's core by primary uses like dwelling units, office, or retail space to avoid the visual impact of garages on the streetscape. The landscaping requirement for parking lots should be revised in favor of appropriately scaled fences or walls.

2. **Residential Off-Street Parking.** Providing access to off-street parking spaces at the front of individual residential buildings disrupts the continuity and safety of the sidewalk with too-frequent driveways, displaces public on-street parking at the curb, and in most of Center City, is both unattractive and unsympathetic to the prevailing design character.

Parking requirements for new residential development, particularly row houses, should be revised to minimize the impact of driveways and garage frontage on the pedestrian environment, even if this means that some new residential development would be built without parking.

3. **Shared Parking.** Most private parking is developed to serve a specific use, such as residential buildings or a school. This can result in parking spaces sitting empty during much of the day or on weekends. This is an inefficient use of scarce land and resources.

Shared parking should be promoted as much as possible, in order to maximize the efficiency of the parking supply and to avoid overbuilding. The Zoning Code should be modified to encourage parking owners to make spaces available to the public when the intended users are not using them.

4. **Other Modes of Transportation.** Automobile parking is one part of Center City's transportation system, and should not be viewed in isolation from other system components. The need for parking is very much related to the availability, attractiveness, and cost of alternative modes of transportation. As a result, parking policy must go hand in hand with actions to improve the alternatives to driving. In some instances, parking policies and regulations can be structured to provide direct support to transit, bicycling, or car sharing.

The City and State must continue to seek adequate and predictable funding for public transit that will enable SEPTA to provide more frequent, reliable, cleaner, safer, and comfortable service, particularly outside of peak hours. Any increased public revenues from parking taxes, fines, meters, or residential parking permits should be dedicated to improving public transit or other alternatives to driving in Center City. New parking facilities should be required to include spaces to accommodate bicycles and Car Share vehicles.

5. **Commuter Travel.** Weekday peak-hour commuters to Center City enjoy superior public transit service availability, compared to tourists, shoppers, and other short-term or off-peak riders. Not only is peak-hour service more frequent, but also the number of people traveling during these hours increases security and thus makes transit users more comfortable. Commuters also are generally well served by the private parking market.

Commuters should be encouraged through marketing, financial incentives such as Transit Chek, Wage Works, or parking cash out, and decisions on garage development, location, and pricing to use public transit rather than drive to work. The Parking Authority should refrain from developing, operating, and pricing parking in such a way as to cater to peak-hour commuters.

6. **Off-Street Parking Rate Structure.** Short-term parking costs significantly more on an hourly basis than all-day commuter parking. In 2005, the average cost to park for one-hour in a Center City garage or lot was \$7.67. The cost for commuter parking, calculating in Early Bird Specials, was \$12.65 – less than \$1.27 per hour. This wide disparity in short-term versus long-term parking rates discourages shoppers, tourists, and other short-term visitors from coming to Center City.

The City should pursue actions that will lower the cost of off-street short-term parking so that it more nearly reflects the per-hour cost of all-day parking. The Parking Authority, in carrying out its mission to serve public needs not provided by the private parking operators, should provide more economical short-term rates in its facilities, and should promote them vigorously.

7. **On-Street Parking.** The cost of metered parking in Center City has not increased since 1980. Current parking meter rates are so much lower than the cost of short-term, off-street parking that most blocks are fully parked up, most of the time. A recent study showed that a vacancy rate of about 15% is necessary to avoid “cruising-induced” traffic, to facilitate easy ingress and egress, and to offer parking opportunities to as many users as possible.

Meter rates should be set at a level that will ensure the regular turnover and availability of a reasonable number of spaces on each block. A vacancy rate of about 15% would offer easy access to on-street parking. Increased revenues from parking meters and fines should be dedicated to improving alternatives to driving in Center City, such as better downtown shuttle transit, a subsidized Center City transit pass, improved maintenance of downtown transit stations, or development of a bike station.

8. **Remote Parking for Commuters.** Center City’s land value does not support a strategy of “remote” commuter parking located at the periphery of Center City. Peripheral parking does not reduce region-wide traffic congestion or air pollution; it requires either very cheap parking or very cheap transit to be acceptable to users. Most of the periphery of Center City consists of residential neighborhoods, where large parking facilities are not desired or welcomed.

“Remote” parking for commuters is best provided by supporting SEPTA and the Parking Authority in the development of park-and-ride options at outlying transit stations. This approach will be facilitated by expansion of Smart Card payment options.

9. **Parking Information.** The new or occasional visitor to Center City can easily become overwhelmed by the one-way street network and frustrated trying to find a reasonably priced place to park. The number and density of parking facilities downtown makes it challenging to provide helpful signage without adding visual clutter to the street. The Parking Authority has a website that lists many parking facilities, along with their rates, and is searchable by destination.

Wider promotion of the Parking Authority website, along with the application of technology to provide real-time information about road conditions and the availability of parking spaces, could improve traffic flow and lessen the anxiety of drivers unfamiliar with Center City. Parking operators and the Parking Authority should cooperate in investigating the use of these technologies.

10. **Parking Rate Signage.** Parking rate signs can be complex, confusing, and make it difficult for many drivers to determine how much it will cost them to park. Signs with too much information, small print, often placed in hard-to-see locations prevent comparison-shopping.

Parking rate signs should be simplified and standardized to allow drivers to compare rates as they search for a space near their destination. Drivers should be able to easily view and read the signs, and determine hourly parking charges.

11. **New Parking Technologies.** Automated or mechanized parking holds the promise of using space much more efficiently, yet there has been little experience with these facilities in the United States.

Mechanized parking proposals will be evaluated based on their potential impacts, including traffic congestion and pedestrian disruption at the entry points, noise, and aesthetics.