



# TOWN OF NATICK COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

BUILDING  
PLANNING  
ZONING  
CONSERVATION

## MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** January 3, 2020

**TO:** Peter Nottonson, Chair  
Members, Natick Planning Board  
Melissa Malone, Town Administrator

**FROM:** James Freas, CED Director

**MEETING DATE:** January 8, 2020

**RE:** Parking in the Downtown Mixed-Use District

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Even as downtown Natick experiences a surge of new investment, parking remains one of the more challenging policy issues to address. Multiple studies over the last decade have reached differing conclusions on the issue of expanding the parking supply and there are many ideas being discussed for how to manage the existing supply. An equally important issue is that of how much parking is required as part of new development projects. High parking requirements in zoning have a range of negative public impacts. In particular, the high residential parking requirement in Natick Center, significantly higher than the requirement anywhere else in Town, has been a challenge to private investment particularly as the Town begins to consider the potential for a mixed use, multi-story development of the 1 South Main Street site recently destroyed by fire. Overall, the high parking requirement in downtown Natick is working against the goals and objectives of Natick 2030 and the Town's economic development interests.

### Negative Public Impacts of High Parking Requirements

Minimum parking requirements were introduced in zoning in the mid-1900s as private automobiles became more common and cities and towns struggled to manage on-street parking. The basic idea was that if every building provided sufficient parking there would be no "spillover" of parking on adjacent streets. The result though was that municipalities overestimated the number of parking spaces needed with a wide range of unintended negative consequences. At the same time, municipalities figured out more effective means of directly regulating on-street parking so as to better manage the original problem through metering, permits, and time limits. In the last 20 years better understanding of parking economics coupled with diversifying transportation options has led municipalities to significantly reduce and even eliminate minimum parking requirements in zoning.

Downtown Natick is no exception to these trends. Already highly walkable, with the new MBTA station, the CRT, and new on-street bike lanes the downtown could easily accommodate car-free or car-lite

households. With lower or no minimum parking requirements, the Town could promote downtown investment while avoiding the negative impacts of high parking requirements. To be clear, lowering or eliminating the parking requirements does not mean that project's would be built with no parking – it simply means that the amount of parking provided would be driven by the developer's market studies for the proposed use, customer, and location such that parking is tailored to need rather than fixed by regulation.

The common negative impacts of high parking requirements are described below. These all derive from an oversupply of parking that stems from fixed parking requirements rather than the amount of parking provided being based on need. There is a large amount of materials available on this topic for any interested in more information on the issue.

Cost – The fundamental negative impacts of high parking requirements come from the cost of building excess parking. The cost of unneeded parking makes some otherwise desirable projects infeasible, limits the money available for other potential project benefits such as quality of the façade or streetscape improvements, and increases housing costs. Additionally, the opportunity cost of land devoted to parking rather than active uses reduces potential tax revenue. In 2014, underground parking was estimated to cost \$34,000 per space.

Streetscape/land use – Surface parking is the most common way to provide for excess parking supply. In a downtown like Natick's surface parking disrupts the pattern of the streetscape, harming the overall retail environment and reducing the walkability. Further, area devoted to parking is land that otherwise could be devoted to active, tax-producing uses, or to public gathering spaces or greenspace.

Environmental – More parking equals more cars with all of the related environmental impacts on air and water quality. Most challenging is that high parking requirements effectively promote greater amounts of carbon emissions, increasing Natick's contributions to climate change.

### **Case Study: 1 South Main Street**

The potential redevelopment of 1 South Main Street offers an interesting case study of the parking requirement in action. Like many downtown sites it is significantly constrained in size. However, preservation and promotion of the character and vitality of Natick Center suggests that the site should have a mixed-use building with ground floor retail and three stories above. As the market will not currently support office uses in new construction in Natick Center, for the purposes of this analysis, residential is assumed to be the upper floor use. This analysis also assumes any on-site parking in Natick Center will be predominantly underground as surface parking would clearly damage the character and reduce potential tax revenue.

The comparable projects in Natick Center that have been built or proposed have relied on maximizing the parking waivers in the bylaw and either the availability of land-area behind the building for surface parking or underground parking. With the exception of 1 parking space, they have not made use of the fee-in-lieu. The surface parking was an affordable solution, but at the cost of a missed opportunity to improve the streetscape for the block behind the building, which could have had small townhouses, new parkspace, or both. The other projects are relying on underground parking, at a lower cost than 34,000 a space because of existing basements that could be converted. The 1 South Main example has neither of these solutions available as the site is constrained and, even if the basement were cleared of the rubble,

it would be challenging at best to reasonably access that space due to the lack of space for turning movements and ramping. Broadly, it is also important to note that the high water table in Natick Center (or really under it) at minimum increases the cost of underground parking, but more likely makes it infeasible in many cases.

As noted above, the existing bylaw has a number of waivers. First, where there is existing commercial space, if there is a discrepancy between the required amount of parking and that currently provided, the parking requirement can be reduced by that amount. This provision essentially acts as a “extra-grandfathering” of the existing parking condition. Then, the parking required for commercial uses can be satisfied off-site. Finally, by special permit, residential or commercial parking requirements can be reduced further with a per space cost of \$23,000 for residential and \$xx,000 for commercial. In addition, also by special permit, a project can deed-restrict the residential to elderly residents, and thereby further reduce the parking requirement. Given the Town’s objectives of a diverse downtown community serving both down-sizing seniors and young professionals working in the growing Natick tech industry, the Town should be cautious about such restrictions.

The table attached demonstrates how these requirements might apply to a development of the 1 South Main Street site.

As the table shows, with all waivers applied, the project is left with a requirement for 5 parking spaces (and a \$333,500 payment), which could be accommodated on site. There are a number of assumptions and challenges in this outcome. First, this approach relies on an interpretation of the zoning bylaw that allows the “discrepancy waiver” spaces, described above to waive required parking for commercial uses, to apply to the parking required for residential uses. Second, this calculation requires that all of the “discrepancy waivers” be applied to residential parking requirements so that the required spaces for the commercial uses can be satisfied off-site. There is precedent for both of these interpretations as that is how projects have been permitted in the past.

Beyond these necessary interpretations, the challenge presented for this project is that a payment of \$333,500 is a significant cost for a project of this size, particularly when one takes into account other public requirements including 15% affordable units, stormwater management, and other mitigation as might be required through the special permit process. These other requirements are clearly necessary and important to the Town and based in clear science and public policy. The end resultant is the combination of a convoluted process to arrive at a requirement, coupled with the high costs associated with any way of meeting that requirement, overall represents a deterrent to investment in Natick Center, contrary to the Town’s goals and objectives.

The final option available at 1 South Main is to shrink the project and/or change it to favor more studio size apartments. Again though, this outcome is contrary to the Town’s goals and objectives as it would reduce housing options in one of the few areas of the Town identified in the Master Plan where the goal is to increase housing options. Particularly with the trend of pushing projects towards more studio-sized units, the parking requirement is driving the market in a counter-productive way as the market preference in Natick Center tends towards 1, 2, and potentially even 3 bedroom units over studios, accommodating the greatest diversity of households, particularly the desirable mix of young professionals and down-sizing seniors.

## **Zoning Amendment Options**

There are three options for amending the Downtown Mixed-Use District to reduce the minimum parking requirements.

Level Townwide Requirements – Perhaps the simplest change, this option would make downtown parking requirements the same as the remainder of Natick. Given the walkable and transit accessible nature of Natick Center, this option would likely still result in excess private parking.

Lower Requirements in Downtown – Municipalities commonly make parking requirements lower for walkable downtowns, especially those with commuter rail access. Common requirements are .75 spaces for each studio or 1 bedroom and 1 space per each larger residential unit. Parking requirements currently in the downtown zoning district for retail and restaurant could be retained or eliminated under this option. The requirement for office could be 1 per 800 or 1,000 square feet.

Eliminate Minimum Parking Requirements Downtown – Increasingly municipalities across the country are eliminating minimum parking requirements entirely, especially in areas served by rail transit. This option would facilitate reuse of historic buildings and redevelopment of underutilized sites in downtown Natick while limiting the potential for additional traffic and improving environmental sustainability. This approach must be coupled with continuing attention to the broader issue of managing the downtown parking supply and consideration of a public parking garage.

New Standards with All Options – Independent of which of the three options described above is preferred, the following additional amendments should be considered:

- Allow parking to be provided offsite as is allowed in the rest of the Town outside of the downtown district.
- Require bike parking – indoor or otherwise protected from the elements and secure.
- Require developments over a threshold size to provide a Transportation Demand Management (TDM) plan describing design features, programs, and other commitments that will encourage and facilitate residents and/or employees in the development to use non-automobile transportation options. For example, a residential project could subsidize commuter rail passes for residents that do not own a car.

## **Next Steps**

Based on feedback from the Planning Board and Select Board, CED staff will draft a warrant article and proposed zoning amendments. These materials will be reviewed with the public and other Town Committees, and brought back to the Planning Board for further feedback. The Natick 2030 plan demonstrates strong community support for actions to encourage new development in Natick Center.