

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend. I'm Taylor Nations with local news and commentary for Tuesday, March 19, 2024.

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This next story is from *The Urbanist*. It has been edited for radio. Port Townsend early this month leapfrogged most other Washington cities when it comes to off-street parking mandates. The number of new parking stalls required with new development within city limits will now just be recommendations. The change is intended to move the city away from being one that is currently “over-parked”, reducing housing costs, and encouraging walkability. It was unanimously approved by the Port Townsend City Council on March 4 as a set of interim regulations that will have to be renewed every six months but are likely to be rolled into the major update to the city’s comprehensive plan in 2025.

This puts our Victorian City, which is fairly rural in character, ahead of many of the state’s more urban jurisdictions. Many urban jurisdictions have rolled back parking requirements for new development near frequent public transit, but none have taken the plunge to roll them back citywide. So this move likely gives Port Townsend the distinction of being the first municipality in the entire state to ditch parking mandates completely, following the footsteps of more than 60 cities around the country, from Bend, Oregon to Roanoke, Virginia.

Port Townsend Mayor David Faber told *The Urbanist*, “What we ended up doing is converting the required minimum parking to recommended minimum parking, that’s the primary code change. The complexity here comes in the form of the engineering design standards for STREET development.” Since 1997, Port Townsend has required developers to construct a fairly broad set of street improvements and, with the same ordinance, those have been revamped.

Faber said, “We put all of that on a diet as well, the engineering design standards. There’s a variety of road types required depending on what your project happens to be... all those should be less intensive than what the current standards are, but they do still require establishing on-street parking. So we reduced the requirements for what has to be done...on the street – and we eliminated the requirements for what has to be done on the property itself.”

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Being small and a bit off the beaten path from Puget Sound’s more urban areas has not prevented Port Townsend from being fairly forward-thinking when it comes to tackling some of its most pressing issues, including ramping up spending on affordable housing. Last March, the City Council unanimously approved an ordinance clearing barriers to creating more infill housing in Port Townsend, removing some parking requirements for accessory dwelling units, relaxing cottage housing design standards, and allowing more unit lot subdivisions, which had been a barrier to creating townhomes.

Port Townsend has grappled with housing affordability woes in recent years, as the housing crisis has gone statewide. Parking mandates drive up housing costs significantly, so housing advocates are hoping that lifting them will spur homebuilding and help lower housing prices over time. Prior to last year’s passage of House Bill 1110, known as Washington’s “missing middle bill,” cities had to conduct environmental review before they were able to repeal parking minimums, adding staff time and administrative burden. But HB 1110 exempted the act of lowering minimums to zero from the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA), clearing away a big hurdle. Not many jurisdictions are jumping to do so.

Any changes to the ability of local governments to set parking minimums are still incredibly controversial at the state legislature, in part due to the influence of the Association of Washington Cities, a lobbying group that advocates on behalf of local governments in Olympia. This is in stark contrast with Oregon, where city after city has been repealing their minimums over the last few years as the state's Department of Land Conservation and Development implemented a rule that applies to the 48 cities in Oregon's metropolitan areas, essentially making a full repeal of mandates the path of least resistance.

Sightline Institute's Catie Gould wrote last summer, "Now over a million Oregonians live in communities where parking is fully voluntary. More cities are poised to join them next year, after using a deadline extension granted by the state." Washington cities may not be ready to head in Oregon's direction without a similar push, but when that time comes, Port Townsend will have been leading the way.

[*Urbanist* reportage by Ryan Packer – see <https://www.theurbanist.org/2024/03/14/port-townsend-just-quietly-ditched-its-off-street-parking-mandates/>]

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