

# Do cities require too many parking stalls be built?

## Buyers of condos in urban centres near transit have little need for cars

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN, VANCOUVER SUN FEBRUARY 8, 2016



Prime On The Plaza in Surrey.

A real estate developer says that a special case needs to be made to ease parking requirements for residential construction in dense new urban areas such as Surrey City Centre.

The call from Jon Stovell, president of Reliance Properties, comes at a time when suburban municipalities have already started relaxing parking requirements near SkyTrain stations and along frequent bus routes. Loosening of parking requirements is also taking place because of social trends that include more people opting out of car ownership or not buying a second vehicle because of car-sharing options.

Prime On The Plaza in Surrey City Centre has only sold 15 of the 210 parking stalls reserved for its 274 micro-suites (micro-suites are just under 300 square feet). Prime has sold 222 of the micro-suites.

Stovell attributed the poor sales of parking stalls in part to the building's prime location: once the building is completed, residents will be within easy walking distance of SkyTrain, shopping, the campus of Simon Fraser University, and the North Surrey Recreation Centre. Many residents, he believes, will be able to live their lives without owning a car and therefore don't need a parking stall.

"We're thinking of going back to the city to say: 'Here's the hard evidence: You don't need this (much) parking. You don't need us to build it,'" Stovell said.

"It's just a fascinating outcome. I think it says a lot about Surrey growing up."

Surrey City Centre is an example, Stovell believes, of an urban area developing in a municipality that still has what he calls "suburban expectations".

Although Surrey has already reduced parking requirements by 20 per cent in Surrey City Centre, he suggests they need to be reduced further to accommodate the trend of people choosing to own fewer cars.

Of the 398 units in Prime On The Plaza, 80 per cent have sold. The 37-storey tower is still under construction and expected to be completed in 30 months.

Prime On The Plaza is a project of Reliance and Macdonald Development Corp.

Philip Bellefontaine, transportation planning manager for the City of Surrey, described Surrey City Centre as an example of “retro-fitting suburbia,” a term used to describe the transition of suburban neighbourhoods into denser urban centres.

He said the 20 per cent reduction in parking for City Centre means that the usual requirement of 1.3 stalls for one-bedroom and bachelor suites drops to a little more than one stall. Surrey has done that because it recognizes that more people in the neighbourhood will walk, bike, car-share and use transit.

For Prime On The Plaza, Bellefontaine said Surrey has reduced the minimum parking even further, to half a stall (0.5) per unit on the micro-suites.

He described that as “quite a healthy relaxation” that acknowledges the unique characteristics of the development.

“As a city, we haven’t got to the end game where we have those densities that allow us to go even further,” he said. “There have been significant and substantial parking reductions on this site. The rates that were finally agreed upon were heavily influenced by the developer saying: ‘This is the kind of market I’m going after.’”

In comparison, Bellefontaine pointed to another Surrey City Centre project a little further away at 104 Avenue and University Drive. Bosa Properties is building Alumni Tower, a 35-storey complex as part of its University District development.

Bellefontaine said the Bosa project has had only a minor reduction from the 20-per-cent relaxation that applies to all City Centre residential buildings.

He also pointed out that since Prime On The Plaza is still under construction, it may find that more parking stalls are purchased once the building nears completion or after people move in and realize they want to buy space for their vehicle.

Bellefontaine said while there is definitely a trend toward providing fewer parking in residential projects in new neighbourhoods, it isn’t a consistent or even process.

“Today, the trend is heading downward in terms of supply,” he said. “That’s not a straight curve down, but generally it’s heading downward.”

A municipality, he pointed out, has to look beyond a single project and consider what may happen in a neighbourhood once a new project is completed.

“After a development is built, and the developer moves on, they don’t inherit the outcomes,” he said. “We have to be comfortable as staff on behalf of council that we’re not creating issues down the line.”

Those issues can include developments without enough parking that cause newcomers in a neighbourhood to park on nearby streets where existing residents already park their vehicles.

Surrey isn’t the only suburban municipality to look at reducing parking requirements near SkyTrain stations and frequent bus routes. In the past few years, Coquitlam has reduced parking requirements around Evergreen Line stations, and New Westminster, in rental units within 400 metres of SkyTrain stations and along the frequent transit network where buses run at least every 15 minutes.

Parking requirements started to change after a landmark 2012 study by Metro Vancouver that looked into apartment and condo parking in the region. It found that the cost of a single on-site parking spot

can range from \$20,000 to \$45,000 per stall.

The study looked at parking occupancy rates in 80 buildings and conducted surveys of more than 1,500 households in 90 apartment buildings. It found that parking vacancy rates throughout the region varied from 18 per cent to 35 per cent.

The demand for parking is lowest within 400 metres of a frequent bus stop or 800 metres of a SkyTrain station, the study discovered.

It also found that "parking demand for apartment renters is much lower than for owners." For market rental units, the demand is less than one vehicle per apartment.

"Proximity to transit was consistently cited by over half of the households surveyed as one of the top three factors when choosing their current home," the report said.

The report recommends selling parking stalls separate from apartments, or allowing consumers to opt out of having a parking stall altogether.

"As underground parking facilities get built deeper down, the cost (especially after the second level) increases substantially."

In the industry, the average cost of supplying a parking garage is considered to be around 10 per cent of the apartment building construction costs.

Average new units are well beyond \$500K in North Van - 10% sounds very high! - cjk

"It is frequently heard that the parkades in many apartment sites in the region are underutilized," the report says.

"Anecdotally, there have been suggestions that some parkades are half-occupied on most nights."

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