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News

Madison Code Reverses on Parking

As protesters swarmed Wisconsin's capital last winter, Madison planners and the city council, with much less fanfare, put the finishing touches on some changes of their own — a rewrite of the city's 45-year-old, often-amended, auto-centric zoning code text.

The code, adopted in late March, makes numerous policy changes, including the creation of mixed use districts and an approval process for accessory dwelling units, idling restrictions for truck-loading areas, and restrictions on parking lots in front of commercial buildings. It also adds building form guidelines, although it stops short of adopting a true form-based approach.

Perhaps the most notable policy change is in parking requirements. Like most U.S. cities, Madison enforced a set of parking minimums in its old code. Office buildings needed at least one stall per 400 square feet; for retail the requirement was one per 300 square feet. Bowling alleys needed a full five stalls per lane.



The old code did allow for parking reductions in some cases, and it did not apply minimums downtown. The new code goes much further. It removes nearly all minimums in nonresidential districts. And for some residential uses, it requires only that site plans show where parking could be placed. The new code also modestly reduces parking maximums.

The parking policy developed over months of discussion in the plan commission, an ad hoc rewrite panel, and other city committees. Although some worried about potential conflicts over street parking, changes to the minimums proved relatively uncontroversial. Some business groups, however, opposed reducing maximums; as a compromise, the city council added an appeal process.

"This code," says council member Satya Rhodes-Conway, "will help our city develop in a smarter way."

— *Eric Sundquist*

Sundquist is a Madison Plan Commission member and managing director of the State Smart Transportation Initiative at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.