

Summary:

Parking Policy and Sustainable Urban Development

Introduction

Cities generally have policy goals including the terms “sustainable development” or “sustainable transportation”. This report is based on the assumption that policies contributing to the reduced use of cars in cities can be part of the efforts to reach such goals. A restrictive parking policy can be one important measure. Both national and local authorities realise this, but it is clearly difficult to define and implement such policies locally.

This report describes some possibilities and challenges connected with parking policy. The report is based on studies of international literature in order to describe the state of the art. A mail survey among Norwegian and Swedish cities constitute the basis for a description of the basis for current parking policies in the two countries.

The cities find it difficult to apply parking policy to restrict car use outside the central urban areas. The competition with neighbouring communities for jobs and retail trade is one reason. Several cities also report that there are many competing interests and agencies involved both in planning and implementation. This makes it difficult to coordinate the interests and define a clearly focused policy.

The largest cities have most resources to work with parking issues. It is also in these cities that the need for a defined parking policy is best understood. Few of the medium-sized or small cities have a clear and comprehensive parking policy. Parking issues are often discussed independent of other policy areas and focus is generally on the challenges found in the central business areas of the cities.

In Norway parking policy has been an issue on the national level for several years. The need for new legal instruments has been acknowledged, but this has not yet resulted in the desired adjustment of tax-regulations or the planning and building law. A couple of the larger cities have introduced maximum parking norms for car parking and minimum norms for bicycle parking at new developments.

Urban administrations in Norway and Sweden recognize that parking policy includes tools having a potential for reducing car use in cities. However, the political courage to use these possibilities is missing.

Should we require a minimum or allow a maximum number of parking spaces in new developments?

It has been a tradition in planning to require a minimum number of parking places. The so-called “norms” are usually based on experience and aims of satisfying demand. Developers often want to provide more than a minimum number of spaces. On the urban fringes where land is cheaper than in the central areas it will not be costly to provide excess parking in order to attract customers or visitors and to offer parking to all employees who want to use a car to work. This may provide for urban sprawl and for the increasing congestion in cities during peak periods.

If a city requires enough parking to satisfy demand this will also be a further step on the road to a community dependent on the car. In the long run this will make services and shops less accessible to persons who for some reason do not want to, or are not able to use a car.

Studies indicate that most of the parking provided by employers is *not* needed for business purposes. Instead one should find the real need for parking for different types of businesses and activities and set a maximum number of places allowed. If this maximum is made independent of location, it will serve as an enticement for developers to locate close to the central city or to places easily accessed by public transport.

Smaller cities will often provide for much of the demand for parking also near the city core in order to compete with out-of-town shopping centres. Parking which is not underground require valuable sites which also may have alternative uses. It is therefore advisable to locate such parking outside the central areas and rather provide easy access by foot, bicycle or smaller transit vehicles.

When a municipality competes with surrounding municipalities for jobs or retail trade, it will be difficult to be alone about a restrictive parking policy if developers continue to believe that provision of parking is necessary for success. Therefore it can be necessary for municipalities to cooperate in order to develop a common, regional parking policy. Maybe regional or national authorities should have the possibility to require such cooperation?

A comprehensive parking policy can also include guidelines for residential parking. In such cases it seems to be useful to define minimum parking requirements in order to protect the local environment and get the resident's cars off the street. However, it is also argued for common parking structures separated from the homes. Larger parking structures give more flexibility and the possibility of combined use (shared parking) with other trip purposes or land uses. By separating parking from the homes it will be possible to build homes at a lower price and only the owners of a car will have to pay for a permanent place. There are also examples of housing projects being built without parking for people who do not want to own a car.

All parking spaces have a cost, but they are often free for the users

The cost of a new urban parking space is dependent of the location and type of structure, but a cost of NOK 300.000 per space is not unusual. Most parking is free for the user whether it is at the shopping centre, at work or other places. It can then be discussed who is really paying for the parking. It has been said that free parking for employees is the most valuable of all fringe benefits. An important measure will therefore be to find ways of transferring the real costs of parking directly to the users.

Normally the municipalities control only a minor share the total number of parking spaces. Gradually more and more parking seems to be privatised and thereby falling outside the share of established parking which can be controlled by the cities. A system which allows the developer to pay an in-lieu fee to the city instead of building parking spaces will give the cities an opportunity to build larger parking structures which can be retained under public control and policy. If such in-lieu fees are made compulsory this tool will be even more powerful.

If parking spaces are established in larger structures separated from other land uses it will be possible to reduce the total number of parking spaces by multiple use (shared parking). A compact and mixed land use improves the basis for such solutions. It may also be easier to document what parking really costs and to have the users pay.

Many public and private employers could be encouraged to take a critical look on what it really costs to offer a large number of free parking spaces. In some places (for example in Australia and England) local authorities have been given legal opportunity to tax or apply a fee to private or reserved parking spaces. As with the “cash-out”-system being used some places (for example USA and England), it has become possible for the employers to transfer some or all of the costs of parking to the employees who area using the parking spaces provided. The literature indicates that in some cases this has lead to a reduction of the total number of spaces being rented.

Need for better knowledge about parking measures and their effects

There is no doubt that parking policy includes many effective measures, which can influence on car use in the cities. It is also a very complex and controversial issue. This may explain the lack of research on this topic. There is no other arena in land use and transportation planning where both public and private interests are so integrated with each other. It cannot be expected that one city alone has the resources to finance the necessary research and studies to lay the basis for a comprehensive parking policy. The study therefore recommends that a special research program on parking policy in cities is established on a national level. This could also be the basis for a Nordic network for the coordination of research and exchange of experiences, knowledge and results from studies.