



# A Messaging Playbook for Parking Reformers

Our road-tested messaging guide to gain more great neighborhoods  
and the homes we need—and to kick excess asphalt to the curb

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*People walking at an intersection in downtown Bellingham, Washington.  
Photo by Anna Fahey for Sightline Institute.*

*Parking flexibility messaging tips based on learnings from campaigns in Washington, Oregon, Montana, and elsewhere, as well as national and regional public opinion research by Sightline Institute and Welcoming Neighbors Network, with support from Parking Reform Network and other partners.*

## Recommended messaging strategies

**Link excessive parking mandates to high housing costs:** Overbuilt parking raises home prices and rents. Outdated mandates for more parking than we need unnecessarily inflate construction costs, waste space, and block homebuilding in cities.

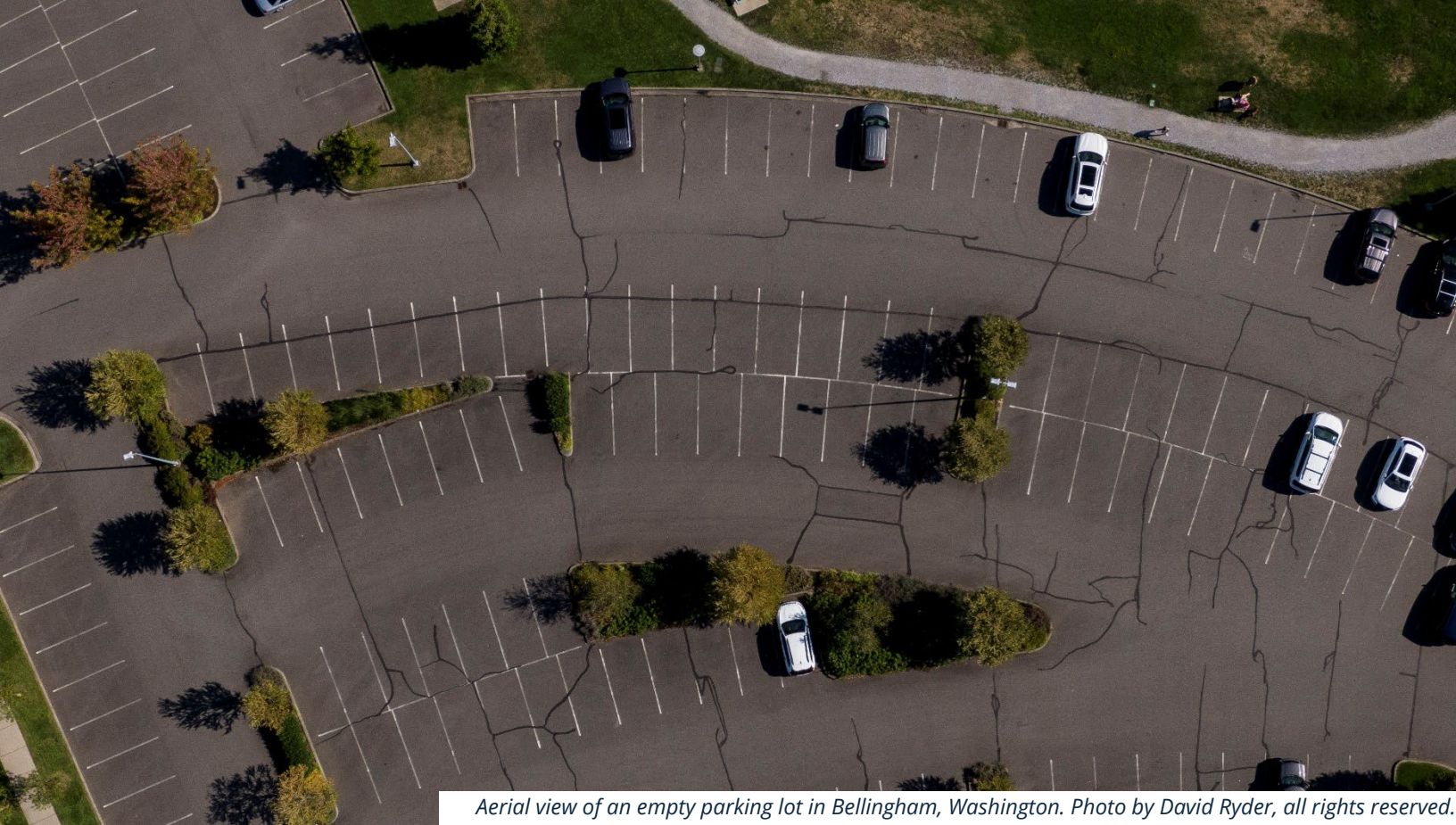
**Shift the frame to flexibility:** What most cities have now are *inflexible* parking rules that require arbitrary, predetermined amounts based on building use or housing type. Most reform efforts aim to stop mandating overbuilding by law and switch instead to *flexibility* for homebuilders and businesses to determine the parking they really need.

**Name parking rules as a factor in the housing shortage:** Forcing more parking than needed limits homebuilding where communities need more home choices. Too few homes to rent or buy creates cutthroat competition and drives up prices.

### Elements of a strong case for parking flexibility:

- Show the status quo is not working. Today's one-size-fits-all mandates force more parking than needed, adding costs while blocking homes and brick-and-mortar businesses.
- Emphasize that flexibility stops senseless overbuilt parking. Flexibility gives the choice to local homebuilders and businesses who know the unique, local context and know best what they need to succeed, to dial parking that's right for their site.
- Reassure that no one is limiting parking. Reforms swap out pre-set quotas for the flexibility to right-size parking and avoid wasteful overbuilding.
- Emphasize the upsides, from curbing housing costs to encouraging local businesses to protecting unique, people-friendly places. We get more of what communities need: more affordable homes and more choices for homebuyers and renters; protections for small businesses, Main Streets, and unique neighborhood character; and more trees and green spaces.

**Tag "parking mandates" with a negative descriptor:** "Costly parking mandates." "Unneeded," "wasteful," "pre-determined," "outdated," "one-size-fits-all."



*Aerial view of an empty parking lot in Bellingham, Washington. Photo by David Ryder, all rights reserved.*

### **Show the harmful consequences of today's parking mandates—concretely:**

- They block the housing our communities need: Name specific affordable or senior housing proposals, small-scale projects like backyard cottages, and new apartments for local workers, perhaps a centrally located, rehabbed building or homes fitted to a vacant lot, proposed by small, local homebuilders.
- They block local businesses and community services: Point out familiar, sympathetic examples like daycares, mom-and-pop businesses, and locally owned restaurants. (Contrast with chain stores and big box retail.)
- They pave over beloved community places: Point to examples like an empty shopping mall parking lot near farmland, empty parking lots dividing up a historic downtown, or residential neighborhoods, parks, and playgrounds with lots of asphalt and few trees. Show photos!

**Highlight tangible, local environmental downsides:** Tree loss, dangerous heat islands, toxic stormwater runoff in local waterways.

**Cast parking flexibility as commonsense:** Forcing too much parking comes with community costs. It makes far more sense to allow the parking we need and give builders and businesses flexibility to dial the right amount of parking for their unique site.

## Avoid language that triggers backlash:

- Don't open with messages about driving less, reliance on cars, or mode shift and transit. Instead, focus on *convenience* and paint a picture of safe, inviting, connected neighborhoods—where homes and shops are *within walking distance*. Research shows that people who are persuadable about parking policy reforms can (rightly) feel stuck about the need to drive and may be defensive if they perceive cars are under attack.
- Shift the emphasis from *car storage* to *wasted space* and *empty parking lots*. People see car storage as necessary. Most can also understand the downsides of mandated excess and the community costs of too much unused asphalt.
- Use “local contractors” and “homebuilders,” not “developers;” and “homebuilding,” not “development.”

## Use familiar, relatable words (not jargon):

- Describe “great places to window shop” or “classic Main Street neighborhoods” instead of using terms like “walkability” or “walkable neighborhoods.”
- Use vivid language to define sprawl as undesirable: e.g., “strip-mall development,” “subdivisions,” “acres of empty asphalt,” or “cookie-cutter sprawl.”

## Don't just tell! Show it with photos:

- Illustrate wasted space and excessive parking with photos of *empty* parking lots.
- Show great places and a city's unique local character with inviting street scenes. (Contrast with photos cookie-cutter sprawl.)
- Show pictures of residential neighborhoods with diverse housing types, trees, greenery, and people out and about.



Children enjoy a playground near apartments and shopping at The Village at Totem Lake in Kirkland, Washington.  
Photo by Webster Chang for Sightline Institute

## Talking points

### ***Parking flexibility curbs housing costs and rents***

One-size-fits-all parking mandates add costs, take up precious space, and block new homes people need—especially for affordable housing providers and small-scale builders working on tight lots or rehabbing buildings. If the parking won't fit or if it costs too much, the homes don't get built. With too few homes, competition drives up prices. Letting homebuilders choose the right amount of parking for the site cuts waste and unlocks homes of all shapes and sizes where our communities need more affordable choices.

### ***Parking flexibility prioritizes people-friendly places***

Today's excessive parking mandates have basically outlawed our favorite kinds of convenient, connected "Main Street" neighborhoods—where shops and homes are in walking distance and buildings aren't surrounded by ugly parking lots. As cities and towns grow and change, parking flexibility protects people-friendly places where it's safe and inviting to window shop or walk the dog, without all the empty pavement.



(L) Aerial view of Barkley Village in Bellingham, Washington. Photo by David Ryder, all rights reserved.  
(R) "Main Street" view of Park Lane in Kirkland, Washington. Photo by Webster Chang for Sightline Institute.

### ***Parking flexibility fends off the familiar community costs of sprawl***

Today's unnecessary parking mandates prioritize cookie-cutter sprawl over our cities' and towns' unique local character. Mandating more parking than our communities really need means more asphalt, more strip-mall development and chain stores, and fewer locally owned mom-and-pop businesses in close-knit, close-in neighborhoods. When it comes to parking rules, flexibility makes more sense than mindless overbuilding.

### ***Parking flexibility rebalances community priorities; less wasted space, more productive uses***

Look around. Parking lots sit empty two-thirds of the time in North American cities and towns. Even during the busiest hours, nearly 40 percent of spaces go unused. We already waste so much space on parking lots; it makes no sense to force yet more overbuilt parking, especially when it's blocking things we need, like more trees and greenery, more locally owned businesses in our downtowns, and more affordable home choices in convenient neighborhoods, near jobs, schools, parks.

***Parking flexibility reduces local, tangible environmental harms***

To meet today's wasteful parking mandates, builders often cut down trees or pave over green space. Parking lots collect toxic road runoff that pollutes our local waterways, and they trap heat that can lead to dangerous heat islands.

***Parking flexibility boosts local businesses and community opportunities***

Outdated parking mandates block things our communities need—like childcare and affordable housing. For example, the space and cost for a required parking lot can make or break a plan for a new daycare, backyard cottage, or local cafe. To support services and small businesses, flexibility makes far more sense than forcing costly overbuilding.

***Parking flexibility is commonsense; communities benefit when we dial parking right for each unique site***

Parking needs depend on the site, location, and building type. One-size-fits-all mandates are arbitrary and excessive, and they ignore real-world conditions. It makes sense to give businesses and homebuilders the flexibility to fit the amount of parking to their specific site, location, and customer and community needs. Standards to allow site-specific flexibility avoid waste, cut costs, and leave room for more homes, shops, and trees in our neighborhoods.



Busy Market in Portland. Photo by Rich Uchytal via Flickr.