

Bill aims to put people before parking

By Star Tribune Editorial Board

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Opinion editor's note: Editorials represent the opinions of the Star Tribune Editorial Board, which operates independently from the newsroom.

There is a commonsense appeal to the idea that cities should require developers to include ample parking in every project they build. A bowling alley, for example, should have a certain number of spaces per lane to accommodate its bowlers. An apartment building should provide adequate parking for its prospective tenants. To do otherwise would mean snarled traffic on city streets, with parked cars lining the curb and not-yet-parked cars jockeying for position near spots that look as if they might be about to open.

As is sometimes the case with apparently commonsense ideas, though, this one may be mistaken. An effort to do away with mandatory minimum parking requirements is underway at the Minnesota Legislature and in other policymaking bodies around the country. The state legislation, called the "Minnesota People Over Parking Act," was announced at a news conference Tuesday by Sen. Omar Fateh, DFL-Minneapolis. He made a good case.

"These mandates often force people to build far more parking than they need," Fateh said. "According to the census, 48% of renter households in Minnesota have one car. And 19% of renter households in Minnesota have no car at all. ... But the large majority of cities in Minnesota have mandates that require between one-and-a-half and two-and-a-half spots per unit."

Fateh added that "the average parking spot in Minneapolis costs well over \$40,000 to build, and that cost gets passed on in the form of higher costs in goods, services, food and rent." If tenants could decline to pay for spots they don't need, he said, they could save hundreds of dollars per month in lower rent.

Fateh and others stressed that nothing in the proposed law would prevent builders from including as much parking as they like. But removing the obligation to build spaces has a number of benefits, they said, besides the lower rent he mentioned.

"Eliminating these mandatory minimums not only makes housing cheaper, but it makes it possible to build more housing on that same amount of land," said U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar, D-Minn., who is a cosponsor of similar legislation in Congress. That bill would do away with minimum parking requirements near transit stations.

Minneapolis took that step in 2015 and followed up with a general ban on mandated minimums in 2021. Duluth and St. Paul did the same. Tony Jordan, president of the Parking Reform Network, told an editorial writer that Minnesota was leading the way in proposing the first statewide ban on the practice.

"You can't wait for more transit or fewer cars or any other contrived precondition to act, because parking mandates prevent quality transit and reinforce car dependency," he said at the news conference.

The minimums can also impede the establishment of small businesses. "Often, our favorite places exist only because they were built before these mandates were in place," Jordan said. "Great places with opportunities for small businesses and entrepreneurs can't exist if it's illegal to open a coffee shop without a parking lot that's three to five times bigger than the building the coffee shop is in."

Jordan said his organization is launching a nationwide campaign to pass legislation in all 50 states. He described the present time as "a watershed moment."

Not everyone agrees. The Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities, which represents 62 municipalities in the state, denounced the proposed legislation as an unwarranted intrusion on local authority. "Let the folks in Mountain Lake, Moorhead, and Mahanomen decide for themselves," it said.

That argument would have appeal if Fateh's legislation imposed a requirement on the people of those communities. In fact, though, it merely lifts the obligation on developers to build more parking than they think is necessary. The initiative does not remove any parking; nor does it discourage the construction of new parking.

The coalition will have ample opportunity to expand on its objections as the bill wends its way through the legislative process. Lawmakers should pay attention. But if this simple initiative can help make housing more affordable, or reduce society's reliance on cars, it's worth serious consideration.