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PEOPLE
Meet the 'Shoupistas.' They hate free parking

Camille von Kaenel, E&E News reporter
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Parking reform is slowly gaining traction in cities around the country. Britta Gustafson/Flickr

When Donald Shoup started connecting the availability of parking with air pollution and sprawl in the 1970s, the urban planning professor was considered an "academic bottom-feeder," he said.

Now he has a cult following.

Thousands of his former students and fans, who call themselves "Shoupistas," want to eliminate what they say is a hidden subsidy for driving: free parking.



Donald Shoup. UCLA

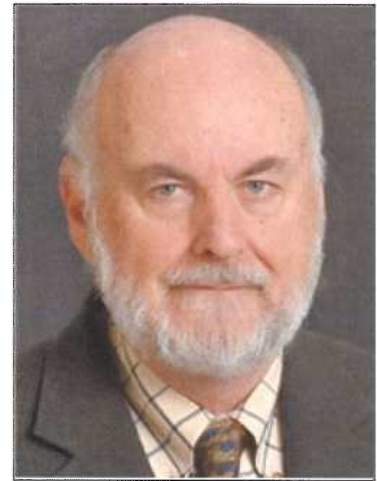
And at a time when many politicians say they're trying to fix housing shortages and tackle climate change, the argument is starting to gain some traction. Local officials in places from Portland, Ore., to Minneapolis — as **recorded** by the Strong Towns movement — have chipped away at parking requirements in the last five years in what Shoup calls "slow progress."

"In the past, it would be hard for planners to say that minimum parking requirements were nonsense because they're so well-established, and they've existed since before people were born," said Shoup, 79, who retired in 2015 after decades teaching full-time at UCLA. "But I think that now many new people are feeling bolder to speak out about the damage."

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City parking requirements hide the cost of storing a car — which some estimate at tens of thousands of dollars a spot — from drivers. Advocates of parking reform say eliminating or pricing parking could help boost alternative ways of getting around.

"Parking is the Achilles' heel of the automobile, and the automobile is one of our biggest challenges in making sustainable, living, post-carbon cities," said Alan Durning, the president of the Sightline Institute in Seattle.

The fact that transportation accounts for two-thirds of Seattle's greenhouse gas emissions was front of mind for the Seattle City Council when it enacted far-reaching parking reform in April. The changes, first drafted in 2015, sought to reduce vacancy and boost alternatives to cars ([Climatewire](#), April 6).

"The people of Seattle have a deep commitment to climate change, and we all love our cars, and those sometimes are contradictory," said City Councilman Mike O'Brien, who helped champion the package of changes. "We have advocates in the community who are saying you can't be true to your climate change goals if you don't change the parking requirements. ... I think it's important to roll out ideas, and we have willing elected officials."

One of the new changes would unbundle parking from rent, stopping landlords from passing on the cost of a parking spot to tenants who don't own cars. Another would allow more shared use of parking spaces. One of the most significant overhauls changed the definition of a single word in a zoning rule to allow a much broader area of the city to qualify for lower parking requirements.

It's the type of change that epitomizes parking reform. It's dry and technical but garnered significant pushback from neighborhood groups seeking to protect their access to free spaces to store their cars.

"Those discussions get heated, and it's all part of the community and how we evolve," said O'Brien.

The state of Washington is falling behind on its climate change goals, primarily because of driving.

Places with strict climate change targets are more forward on parking reform, experts say. California law requires cities and regions to meet overall emission reduction targets, prompting cities to tweak their zoning rules.

"There's a bit more teeth with that," said Michael Manville, an assistant professor of urban planning at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs. "Absent some sort of pressure from high level of government, many cities would first try to satisfy their climate change goals through steps that are potentially less antagonistic to their voters."

Manville was a student of Shoup's.

'It sounds radical'

The professor has achieved rock star status in the parking world.

Nearly 4,000 fans have joined a Facebook group named "The Shoupistas." The moniker came about when a former student kept preaching the ills of free parking at a happy hour for transportation nerds.

"It sounds radical, like Sandinista or Fidelista, but really it just means someone who's doing something," Shoup said with a laugh.

The Facebook group is the "closest there is" to an organized movement for parking reform, said Durning.

"It's hard politically to get people to care about parking, until they don't have any, which is why this is so difficult," said Durning. "I'm fascinated by it and obsessed by it because it's so powerful and important, but so little discussed."

He's not the first to have found it fascinating. Jane Jacobs lamented the parking lots that created "dead downtown" in the 1960s. But Shoup is the one to have achieved the sort of clear, unapologetic language bashing underpriced parking that came after repeating the same argument for decades.

His 2005 book, "The High Cost of Free Parking," became a bible for his followers. They contributed chapters for his latest book, "Parking and the City," published last month.

Part of Shoup's appeal is that he has learned to fine-tune his argument to his audience.

"For conservatives, it's about government spending and free services," he said. "For environmentalists, it means reduced air pollution. For developers, it's cheaper to build things. For housing activists, it's a

lower cost of housing. For urban design people, it means infill development. For politicians, it depoliticizes parking."

The theory goes like this:

Most zoning ordinances in cities require off-street parking spaces for a certain number of new residential or commercial spaces. In parts of Los Angeles County, which has the most parking in America, developers must build two parking spots for every one housing unit. In dense parts of New York City, the requirement can be fewer than 50 parking spaces for every 100 new housing units.

The Shoupistas want to throw those out the window. They reached a "high point" in 2016, when the Obama White House endorsed the concept to boost housing and reduce greenhouse gas emissions ([Climatewire](#), Sept. 27, 2016).

They also want to charge more (Shoup says "the right price") for on-street parking. That means more parking meters on city streets and live price adjustments. For example, Washington, D.C., is several years into a pilot program where the price for parking changes depending on the time of day and the demand.

The final prong of Shoup's proposed reform is to use the new revenue from parking to improve public services, like neighborhood playgrounds or green spaces, on the metered streets.

It's a way to sweeten the deal for recalcitrant neighbors.

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122 C Street NW 7th Floor Washington, DC 20001
Phone: 202-628-6500 Fax: 202-737-5299
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