

[San Diego adopts new policy wiping out parking requirements for many businesses](https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-11-21/new-san-diego-policy-eliminates-parking-requirements-for-many-businesses?_amp=true)

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San Diego is wiping out parking requirements for businesses in many neighborhoods.
(K.C. Alfred / San Diego Union-Tribune)

SAN DIEGO —

San Diego took the bold and controversial step Tuesday of wiping out parking requirements for businesses in many neighborhoods to accelerate efforts to make the city less car-reliant and more climate-friendly.

The City Council unanimously approved the elimination of parking requirements for businesses near mass transit or in small plazas near dense residential areas.

New businesses in those areas would no longer have to provide any parking spaces for customers or staff. And existing businesses could immediately transform their parking spots into outdoor dining or extra retail space.

Supporters, including many business and environmental leaders, said the policy would start a slow and incremental shift in San Diego away from reliance on cars.

They stressed that the city isn't mandating that businesses eliminate parking, just allowing businesses the discretion to determine how much parking they need and how best to use the acreage available.

Transportation accounts for more than 50% of local greenhouse gas emissions, making such policy changes crucial to San Diego's efforts to meet the goals of its legally binding climate action plan, supporters said.

"This is a way to protect the climate while at the same time supporting economic growth," said Councilmember Stephen Whitburn, who represents downtown, North Park and nearby areas. "We need to do both to ensure a healthy and vibrant San Diego for future San Diegans."

Critics said San Diego's transit system isn't nearly comprehensive enough for such a drastic step.

They stressed that senior citizens and disabled people can't easily take transit, bike or walk places. They also said many residents live in suburban neighborhoods where they are forced to lead car-reliant lifestyles.

A group of neighborhood leaders from across the city voted 21-3 against the proposed changes when they were first unveiled last spring.

Councilmember Marni von Wilpert, who represents Scripps Ranch and Rancho Bernardo, said she approved the new policy despite some concerns.

"It's simply not possible for the vast majority of people in my district to hop on a bus," she said. "We have no trolley lines in District 5 and no plans to build them, and there are no major bike lane improvements coming."

Von Wilpert successfully persuaded her colleagues to eliminate language that would have made the new policy apply to large properties where only a small portion is near a transit hub.

Mayor Todd Gloria's staff also agreed to work with von Wilpert to refine how the city determines what qualifies as a transit hub.

It is now defined as areas within half a mile of a trolley line, a bus rapid transit station or two high-frequency bus routes. The nearby transit must be operating or scheduled to begin operating within five years.

The policy eliminates parking requirements for businesses in those areas and for businesses in areas designated "neighborhood commercial," which are smaller plazas and business districts that serve adjacent residents.

That's in contrast with regional commercial centers, like Fashion Valley mall, and general commercial areas and industrial areas.

Council President Jen Campbell's concerns about the new policy focused on how it will affect older residents and disabled people.

"It concerns me that a reduction in parking could affect equity for both of these communities," she said. "More than 25% of San Diegans are over the age of 55."

Campbell successfully lobbied her colleagues to require more disabled spots at businesses that make the choice under the new policy to still have parking lots.

John Knoll, a Bankers Hill attorney, said the new policy would hurt many businesses instead of helping them.

“Residents and businesspeople want parking,” he said. “There is a real disconnect between the policy the city is pursuing and what the voters want.”

Supporters said the new policy is needed for the city to avoid long-term traffic gridlock as more housing and commercial developments are built.

City officials said the policy is based on similar changes in Portland, Ore., and Seattle that have helped decrease the percentage of commuters in those cities who use cars.

The San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce expressed support.

“It will give new business development flexibility and the choice to provide parking for their customers where public transit, jobs and services are already close by,” said Angeli Calinog, a chamber policy advisor.

The new policy builds on San Diego’s action two years ago eliminating parking requirements for new condominium and apartment complexes near mass transit.

But unlike that proposal, which only applied to future projects, the parking policy change for businesses is retroactive. That’s why businesses can immediately transform parking spots into other uses.

The new policy won’t take effect in the city’s coastal zone, which is loosely defined as neighborhoods west of Interstate 5, until the California Coastal Commission approves it. It takes effect everywhere else Jan. 1.

“I’m pleased that the City Council has approved this parking policy reform, and I look forward to seeing its transformative impacts on our neighborhoods and businesses,” Mayor Gloria said.