

National City Development Is Walkable, Close to Transit ... and Still Has Tons of Parking - Voice of San Diego



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If ever a housing development was ripe to cut down on parking spaces, it would be National City's Paradise Creek. Yet a push from the city to reduce parking spaces for the development never got off the ground. The struggle reveals one of the region's biggest challenges when it comes to providing affordable housing and encouraging the use of public transit.



Photo by Jamie Scott Lytle

The Paradise Creek housing complex in National City.

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If ever a housing development was ripe to cut down on parking spaces, it would be National City's Paradise Creek.

The 201-unit, low-income housing complex is close to public transit. And National City is one of the densest, [most walkable places](#) in the county.

Yet a push from the city to reduce parking spaces for the development and use the additional room for ride-sharing or infrastructure for electric vehicles never got off the ground.

The struggle reveals one of the region's biggest challenges when it comes to providing affordable housing and encouraging the use of public transit.

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The project [broke ground](#) in November, and it located just a few blocks away from a trolley station and multiple bus stops. It was one of only five projects nationwide awarded a [sustainable communities grant](#) from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and was the only housing project in San Diego County to receive state [cap-and-trade funds](#) intended to promote low-income housing projects near public transit.

Months ago, Brad Raulston, the city's executive director of planning and community development, approached the project's developers, Community Housing Works and Related California, with an idea to reduce parking.

Reducing parking can lower costs for developers and leave space for additional housing units or other amenities. Some advocates of public transit and transit-oriented development [say](#) it can also encourage the use of public transit.

But Raulston's idea didn't get far.

"This was a project where we had an opportunity to really move the needle," Raulston said. "But it just didn't work out."

Paradise Creek will have 308 parking spaces in a mix of surface parking and parking structures. That's more than National City's 236-space minimum parking requirement for the area.

Developers say one reason the parking-reduction idea didn't work is because it was floated too late in the process. The project had already been designed, permitted and was just about to break ground when Raulston and his colleagues started the parking discussions.

Any proposal to alter parking should have happened at the outset when it was easier to change the project design, said Michael Massie, the Paradise Creek project manager for Related.

"One parking space can change where your sewer is going," said Carlos Aguirre, the Paradise Creek project manager for National City. "The approval process is a monster for this."

At the outset, National City, developers and the community had to prioritize other issues. The development was originally planned under the state's redevelopment program, which helped cities rebuild rundown areas. But when redevelopment ended and the recession hit, the project was held up for years. They also had contaminated brownfields to clean up in the once heavy industrial area before they could build homes on the property.

"There was so much we had to deal with in this project during those middle years when we could have been focusing on the design," Aguirre said. "We had to pick our battles."

Another issue was that car-sharing programs like car2go weren't interested in expanding into National City, said Raulston.

Then there's the issue of marketability.

"If you're a family choosing between Development A and Development B and the economics are the same, the project with more access to parking is going to be at an advantage," said Massie. "As the culture changes and public transit becomes more a part of people's lives that will become less true. You just don't see that here yet."

The apartments will be near public transit, said Aguirre. But that doesn't mean the transit will fulfill people's needs if they work in North County or other parts of San Diego not easily accessible by trolley and bus.

Carolina Martinez, a planner and policy advocate at the Environmental Health Coalition, wasn't privy to the parking discussions, but works with the community members who advocated for building affordable housing on the property and participated in its planning process.

Access to transit was important for community members when they envisioned the development, she said. People often travel north to go to work and even to access medical services.

"While there are people who have cars, there's a lot of walking that happens in the community," Martinez said.

But there are still issues with transit. It doesn't go everywhere people need to go or it takes hours to get there. Something like a car-sharing program integrated with parking would have likely been the best option for future residents, she said.

"In my mentality, I think people are willing to make a decision whether they want to give up their cars or pay for parking," Raulston said. "But it's more complicated than that."

There's a Southern California stigma around buildings that don't meet certain parking ratios, Raulston said.

"The problem is that we have expensive housing and free parking," said Donald Shoup, a professor of parking economics at UCLA's Luskin School of Public Affairs. "It's the wrong way around."

In a [recent paper](#), Shoup estimated that, on average, one above-ground parking space costs \$24,000 to construct. Underground spaces cost about \$34,000 on average.

"A single parking space can cost far more to build than the net worth of many American households," Shoup wrote.

Shoup said that for low-income housing, the cost of providing parking becomes even more problematic. A lot of the subsidy for affordable housing goes toward parking, even when many of the families can't take advantage of it because they don't own cars, he said.

Aguirre said he thinks that if the cap-and-trade money, which helped fund Paradise Creek, had incentivized

parking reductions, the city could have made a better sell to reduce parking. The state recently started a new affordable housing grant program with money from its cap-and-trade program revenue. The grants are meant to encourage smart growth by funding public-transit projects and low-income housing developments near public transit.

“There’s this whole discussion at the state level to try and incentive reducing our carbon footprint by funding affordable housing projects that are near public transportation lines, but they’re not asking for a reduction in parking,” he said.

Aguirre said he’s currently fielding calls from the projects’ neighbors, who are already complaining about subcontractors parking on the street and in lots surrounding the property as construction moves forward.

“It’s already an issue,” he said. “Our dependence on the car is still our dependence on the car.”

Given that, he said, the project probably has just the right amount of parking.