



Developers of new office buildings in downtown Vancouver now are required to provide fewer parking spots - in some cases, less than half of what would have been required two decades ago.

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development

## Parking being squeezed out in Vancouver

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At Graham McGarva's architecture firm, only five of the 20 employees commute to work by car. And that's a high ratio compared with other workplaces nearby.

So he knew already that office parking downtown was becoming less of an essential item.

But the point was really driven home when his firm, VIA Architecture, went to work on a new office tower that will face the city's former train station, now its top transportation hub for commuter rail and buses.

The owner of the site, at 320 Granville, is tearing down a 50-year-old parking garage that is becoming less profitable every year. And, in the new 32-storey office tower that will be built in its place and likely house as many as 1,800 people, Mr. McGarva is including only 133 parking spots – less than half of what would have been required two decades ago and a quarter of the norm in the 1960s.

He's not the only one – other office builders in Vancouver are doing the same. “We're all seeing different aspects of that trend,” Mr. McGarva says.

“In the old days,” says Vancouver's planning director, Brent Toderian, “they would have had to not only build the parking required for the new construction” – about 300 stalls – “but you would have had to replace the parking of the old garage.” In this case, the parkade that will be torn down has about 500 spaces.

Vancouver's 1997 transportation plan capped downtown parking and banned new roads. Since then, the number of car trips and parking spots has gradually declined, even while the number of jobs and overall trips in the central city have increased.

Back then, the parking standard was one stall for every 1,000 to 1,500 square feet. Today the figure is far less – and negotiable for every building. That's in spite of the fact that today's buildings hold twice as many people in these open-plan, cost-cutting times.

Last year marked a big change in parking behaviour as commuters responded to a new 35-per-cent tax on parking stalls in commercial lots, higher on-street parking costs, and the new Richmond-to-Vancouver rapid-transit line built for the Olympics that has proven to be a huge hit with the downtown crowd.

Parking revenue collected at city-owned garages dropped by 9 per cent, while funds from on-street parking, traditionally an ever-increasing moneymaker, did not rise as much as the city's finance department had been counting on.

The trend is also showing up in the underground lots of commercial buildings, both in the downtown peninsula and the city's second downtown along Broadway. The city's transportation engineer, Jerry Dobrovolny, commissions a usage survey every two years.

“There's a high vacancy rate in the majority of those buildings. And the studies show the vacancies are rising. At the peak – noon to 2 p.m. – some are only half full,” Mr. Dobrovolny says.

For proposed office buildings, predicting what's needed is a tricky business. Put in too many spaces and you've added a big expense that makes no money. Put in too little and you may have trouble leasing the building.

“Notwithstanding what developers want to do, I have to build something I can lease,” says Tony Astles, an executive vice-president at Bentall Kennedy (Canada) LP, which has been building and leasing office buildings in Vancouver for decades. “Parking is a negative drag on your pro forma, yes. But tenants are slow to respond to the evolution that's been occurring. And that evolution is only two years old.”

Mr. Astles says the toughest part of his leasing job at Bentall's Broadway Tech Centre is convincing prospective tenants that they really don't need the same number of spaces they had in suburban business parks far from transit.

To convince the doubters, Mr. Astles introduces them to other tenants who believed they needed a high level of parking and then found that more employees commuted by bus than by car once they had better transit options.

Sometimes prospective customers can't be convinced. Corporate real-estate broker Glenn Gardner has had tenants reject downtown buildings where they couldn't secure the standard amount of parking.

“Law firms, large mining companies, accountants – they want the convenience of parking in their building,” said Mr. Gardner, who is with [Avison Young's](#) Vancouver office.

Sometimes they just want the convenience of having a 24-hour downtown spot. Former B.C. attorney-general Geoff Plant, now back at his practice at the blue-chip law firm Heenan Blaikie LLP, rides his bicycle to work three or four times a week from the west side of Vancouver.

He still has a parking spot, however, which he uses when he and his wife attend evening theatre events.

But, he says, "I do wonder how much longer that will make sense." Every year, he commutes more often by cycling, walking or jogging and uses his spot less.

### **Vanishing spots**

Vancouver developers are being required to provide fewer parking spots for new office buildings compared with those built 40 or 50 years ago.

### **Old builds**

**Building:** 777 Hornby, formerly First City Trust building, a 20-storey tower built in 1969

**Size:** 138,585 square feet

**Parking:** 457 stalls

### **New builds**

**Building:** Credit Suisse tower, a proposed 30-storey building at 800 West Pender

**Size:** 320,000 square feet

**Parking:** 164 stalls planned

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