

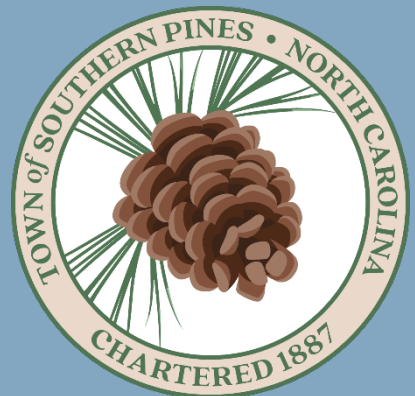
# Issue Paper: Right-Sizing Parking in Southern Pines

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**Town of Southern Pines Planning Department**



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# Acknowledgements

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## Statement of the Issue

Established in the late 19th century as a seasonal retreat for Northerners and a destination for those seeking the region’s perceived health benefits, Southern Pines has long balanced growth with a strong sense of place. Today, that balance is guided by the Town’s 2040 Comprehensive Plan (2040 Plan), which calls for growth that preserves the character and charm that define the community. A key recommendation of the plan is to modernize parking standards so they better align with goals such as encouraging infill development, supporting walkability, and maintaining the urban design qualities that make Southern Pines distinctive. This issue paper evaluates current parking regulations, explores their historical context, and incorporates community perspectives alongside emerging best practices in parking reform. Across the United States, communities are rethinking parking requirements as they recognize that excessive parking can limit development potential, constrain small businesses, and undermine efforts to create vibrant, human-scaled places. With parking often occupying more land than the destinations for which it is provided, the challenge is not simply to provide parking, but to do so in a way that reflects community values. In Southern Pines, this means advancing a balanced approach centered on three core goals: preserving local character, avoiding excessive and underutilized parking, and encouraging infill over sprawl.

Current parking regulations can, in some cases, contribute to inefficient land use by encouraging outward expansion and by dedicating large areas to parking rather than productive uses. Expansive surface lots represent lost opportunities for businesses, parks, housing, and other community assets that contribute to a lively and engaging environment. These patterns directly conflict with the Town’s emphasis on infill development, particularly given the limited supply of developable land within Southern Pines. Minimum parking requirements can make redevelopment of older sites difficult, especially in established areas with space constraints, and can create financial and logistical barriers for small business entrepreneurship. They also tend to separate land uses, reducing walkability and discouraging “park-once” behavior while increasing infrastructure costs as development spreads outward. From a design perspective, large parking areas often result in environments that feel disconnected and less inviting, diminishing the cohesive character that Southern Pines seeks to preserve. At the same time, it is important to recognize that Southern Pines remains largely auto-dependent, and insufficient parking can create challenges, including congestion, spillover into nearby neighborhoods, and impacts on public safety and services. This underscores the importance of “right-sizing” parking, or ensuring that enough is provided to meet demand without requiring more than is necessary.

Beyond land use and design considerations, parking minimums have meaningful economic, housing, and environmental impacts. The cost of constructing and maintaining parking, ranging from thousands of dollars per space for surface lots to significantly more for structured parking, raises development costs that are ultimately passed on to residents and businesses. These added costs can limit entrepreneurship, reduce investment, and constrain the feasibility of smaller-scale infill projects. Parking requirements also affect housing affordability by increasing per-unit costs and limiting the development of diverse housing

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types, particularly “missing middle” housing styles such as duplexes, multiplexes, and live-work units. In many cases, developers are pushed toward larger projects simply to absorb these parking costs, thereby shaping development outcomes that may not align with community preferences. Environmentally, large surface lots contribute to stormwater runoff, increase infrastructure strain, reduce tree cover, and intensify the urban heat island effect, all of which carry long-term implications for community resilience and quality of life. At the same time, parking regulations do play a role in managing site intensity, helping ensure that higher-impact uses are located in areas that can accommodate them. Taken together, these considerations highlight the need for a more flexible and context-sensitive approach to parking, one that supports economic vitality, expands housing opportunities, protects environmental resources, and ultimately advances the long-term vision for Southern Pines.

## Regulatory Context

Minimum parking requirements have become a defining feature of the built environment throughout the United States, but their origins reveal how disconnected they can be from today’s planning goals. First introduced in Columbus, Ohio, in 1923, these regulations were initially intended to prevent spillover parking into nearby neighborhoods as automobile ownership increased.<sup>1</sup> By the 1950s, minimum parking requirements had become standard practice across cities and towns of all sizes. In Southern Pines, parking minimums were formally incorporated into local ordinances in 1966. Today, the United States has an estimated two billion parking spaces, roughly eight for every car, reflecting decades of policy that prioritized accommodating peak vehicle demand.<sup>2</sup> These minimum parking requirements typically rely on generalized ratios derived from national data sources, such as those from the Institute of Transportation Engineers, which often reflect suburban, single-use developments with limited transportation options.<sup>3</sup> As noted by UCLA Professor Donald Shoup, these standards often reflect maximum observed demand rather than typical or context-sensitive needs; yet, they are treated as minimum requirements in local codes.<sup>4</sup> This one-size-fits-all approach has led to an oversupply of parking, contributing to dispersed land-use patterns, reduced walkability, and development outcomes that conflict with community goals.

Over time, both travel behavior and community priorities have evolved, calling into question the continued reliance on rigid parking minimums widely adopted over 75 years ago. These standards were established long before the rise of online shopping, remote work, and ride-hailing services, as well as before widespread interest in creating walkable, mixed-use environments. Since the late 1990s, planners and researchers have increasingly recognized that excessive parking requirements can constrain development, increase costs, and limit the creation of the kinds of places people value most.<sup>5</sup> In response, many communities are reexamining their parking policies to better align with contemporary needs.

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<sup>1</sup> American Planning Association et al. (2006).

<sup>2</sup> National League of Cities. (2022).

<sup>3</sup> Lockhart, K. (2024).

<sup>4</sup> Shoup, D. C. (1999).

<sup>5</sup> Nichols, C. M. (2019).

However, in Southern Pines, the core structure of parking regulations remains rooted in decades-old standards. The Town’s current Unified Development Ordinance (UDO), particularly Section 4.5, establishes minimum off-street parking requirements by land use while allowing some administrative flexibility. The Planning Director can adjust requirements in certain cases to reflect site-specific conditions or take advantage of shared or on-street parking. Some overlay districts incorporate reduced or waived requirements. Notably, the Downtown Historic District benefits from such exemptions, which have played a key role in preserving its walkable, human-scaled character. For example, a restaurant located on East New Hampshire Avenue would be required under standard code provisions to provide more than 35 off-street parking spaces, which would significantly alter the built form and diminish the walkable character of the surrounding area.

Other retail sales	1 space per 200 square feet of Gross Floor Area	1 space per 5,000 square feet
Open air markets	1 space per 1,000 square feet of Lot Area used for storage, display or sales.	1 space per 5,000 square feet
Banks and credit unions	1 space per 200 square feet of Gross Floor Area	1 space per 5,000 square feet of floor area
Financial, real estate, travel and legal services	1 space per 300 square feet of Gross Floor Area	1 space per 5,000 square feet of floor area
Other professional offices	1 space per 400 square feet of Gross Floor Area	1 space per 5,000 square feet of floor area
Animal services	1 space per 200 square feet of Gross Floor Area	
Restaurants (Ord. # 1716)	1 space per 100 square feet of Gross Floor Area plus one space per 100 square feet of outdoor seating area	1 space per 5,000 square feet of floor area
Personal care and other consumer services	1 space per 200 square feet of Gross Floor Area	1 space per 5,000 square feet of floor area
Laundromats and dry cleaners	1 space per 200 square feet of Gross Floor Area	

*Figure 1 Excerpt from Section 4.5 of the Unified Development Ordinance*

While these limited flexibilities demonstrate the potential benefits of a more adaptable approach, broader reform is constrained by state-level legislation. North Carolina’s Session Law 2024-57, adopted in response to the impacts of Hurricane Helene, restricts local governments from implementing more stringent zoning regulations that would create nonconformities or constitute “down-zoning.”<sup>6</sup> In practice, this limits the range of parking reforms presently available to municipalities. For Southern Pines, this means that while reducing or eliminating minimum parking requirements may be permissible since such changes are less restrictive, introducing parking maximums to prevent oversupply is not currently allowed, as it could render existing parking lots nonconforming. As a result, the Town’s ability to fully align parking policies with the vision outlined in its 2040 Comprehensive Plan is somewhat constrained. Nevertheless, opportunities remain to modernize parking requirements within these limitations, particularly by reducing reliance on rigid minimums and expanding context-sensitive flexibility, helping the Town move toward a more balanced, efficient, and character-driven approach to growth.

## Community Input

The 2040 Plan provides a clear policy foundation for rethinking how parking is planned and designed in the community. Policy 3.9, “Improve Parking Design in the Community,” serves as a central call to action, encouraging updates to parking standards so they better align with broader community goals. This policy

<sup>6</sup> North Carolina General Assembly. (2025–2026).

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works in tandem with Policy 3.2, which emphasizes development standards that enhance community appearance and reinforce a distinct sense of place. Together, these policies highlight that parking is not simply a functional requirement, but a key design element that shapes how places look, feel, and function. The Plan further recommends that large retail developments incorporate shared green spaces, pedestrian connections, and thoughtful site design that support a “park-once mentality,” an approach where visitors can park once and comfortably walk between destinations. At present, many commercial areas in Southern Pines are characterized by buildings set far back from large surface parking lots, with limited connectivity between sites, creating environments that are difficult to navigate on foot and lack a cohesive identity. Many have experienced the need to drive between nearby destinations simply because it is uncomfortable or unsafe to walk across large adjoining parking lots. Reforming parking standards is therefore an important tool to enable more walkable, connected, and place-oriented development patterns. Importantly, parking reform does not mean entirely eliminating parking, nor does it affect requirements such as ADA-accessible spaces. Rather, it focuses on “right-sizing” parking, ensuring that adequate supply exists without creating excessive, underutilized expanses that detract from the community.

Staff spoke with and gathered input from developers and stakeholders, which reinforces the importance of flexibility in achieving this balance. In the multifamily housing context, developers typically rely on well-established internal ratios by unit type to ensure sufficient parking for residents while avoiding building too much parking that creates unnecessary costs. Because parking is expensive to build, developers are generally incentivized to provide only what is needed for a project’s success. However, when local minimum requirements exceed these internally derived ratios, developers are forced to overbuild parking, often at the expense of green space, amenities, or overall site design. In these cases, reducing or eliminating minimums can allow for more efficient and context-sensitive outcomes. On the other hand, overly restrictive parking maximums can limit the types of housing that can be built by constraining unit mix and density.

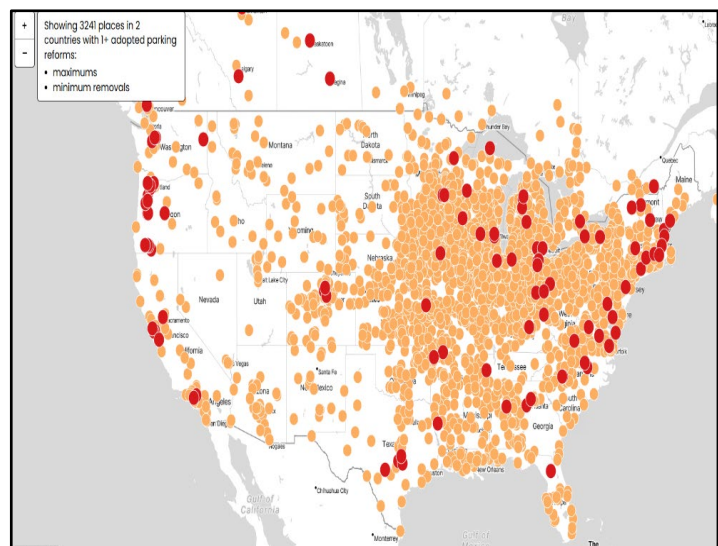
In the commercial sector, parking decisions are similarly shaped by tenant needs, market expectations, and financial feasibility. Large commercial development is typically centered on tenant-anchored or speculative projects. Tenant-anchored developments, such as grocery stores or national retailers, often have specific parking requirements. Developers typically use general ratios as a starting point, adjusting upward for uses with higher turnover, such as restaurants, and may build additional capacity to account for uncertainty in tenant mix. In contrast, speculative developments tend to overbuild parking outright to remain flexible to a wide range of potential users. Local regulations can sometimes conflict with these realities, either by requiring more parking than necessary, by limiting supply below what tenants consider viable, or by permitting overbuilt parking facilities. All three emphasize the need for a more adaptable regulatory framework.

Defining the “right” amount of parking is ultimately a balance between quantitative data and community values. From a technical perspective, “parking utilization rates” offer a useful benchmark: industry guidance suggests that lots consistently operating at around 85 percent occupancy are generally well-

balanced.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, significantly lower or higher utilization may indicate over- or undersupply. However, conducting comprehensive parking utilization studies can be costly and resource-intensive. As a result, Southern Pines can look to its 2040 Comprehensive Plan as the guiding framework for determining appropriate parking outcomes. In this context, right-sized parking is not simply a number, but a set of principles: it minimizes excess pavement while still meeting demand in the majority of circumstances; supports walkability and a park-once experience; preserves trees and open space; reduces stormwater impacts; and allows for infill and redevelopment opportunities. It prioritizes on-street and shared parking where appropriate, locates parking to the rear of buildings so the building, not the parking, is the primary design focus of the site, and integrates landscaping to maintain a more natural visual quality. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that parking supports, rather than detracts from, the Town’s vision, enabling growth that is economically viable, environmentally responsible, and consistent with the character that defines Southern Pines.

## Best Practices & Opportunities

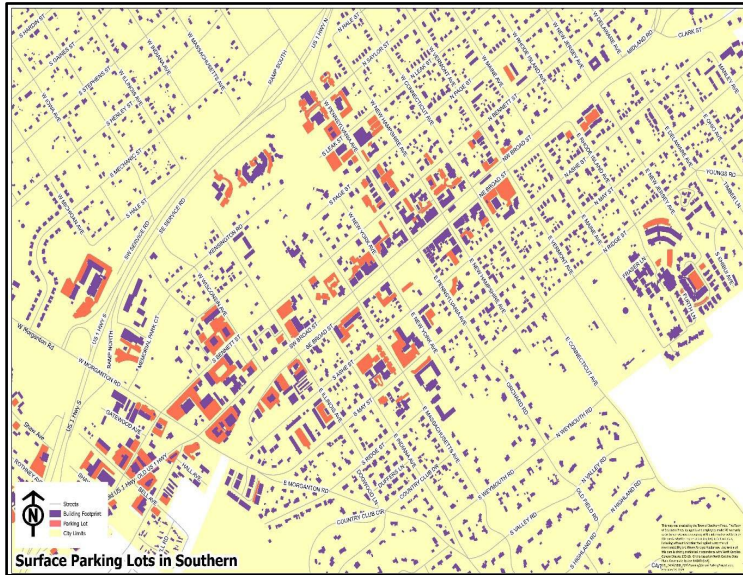
Across North America, more than 200 cities and towns, ranging from large metropolitan areas to small communities (see Figure 2), have implemented reforms such as reducing or eliminating parking minimums, introducing parking maximums or medians, establishing parking districts, and encouraging shared parking arrangements.<sup>8</sup> These strategies are not intended to eliminate parking, but rather to ensure that the amount provided aligns with actual demand and community priorities. In Southern Pines, this presents a clear opportunity to modernize parking standards in a way that preserves local character while supporting growth. Tools such as removing minimums can give developers flexibility to “right-size” parking, while maximums can prevent overbuilding and protect land for more productive



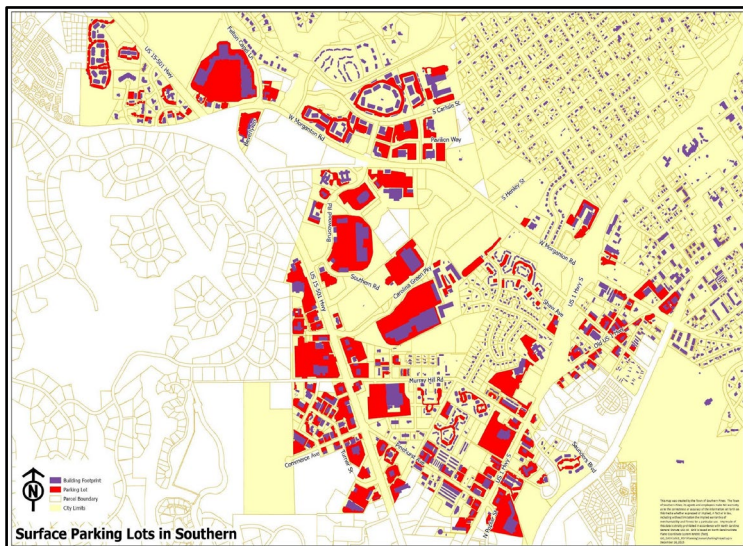
*Figure 2 Implemented Parking Reforms Across North America (Source: Parking Reform Network. Orange represents smaller towns and cities, red represents large metropolitan areas.)*

<sup>7</sup> Eckart, Emily. 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Sohoni, S., & Lee, B. (2024).



uses. Median parking requirements offer a middle ground by allowing a range of spaces, with justification required outside that range. Parking districts can tailor standards to specific areas, much like the Downtown Historic District, where waived requirements have helped maintain a walkable, human-scale environment. Shared parking agreements further reduce redundancy by allowing different uses to rely on the same spaces at different times. Importantly, these tools can be applied selectively, allowing Southern Pines to tailor reforms to its own context rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all solution.



An analysis of existing conditions in Southern Pines highlights the impact of current parking requirements on land use patterns. Downtown, where parking minimums are waived, offers a clear example of how reduced off-street parking requirements can support a compact, pedestrian-oriented environment and a strong sense of place (Figure 3, Top). In contrast, areas outside downtown, particularly along major corridors such as US Highways 1 and 15-501, are dominated by large expanses of surface parking associated with commercial centers,

*Figure 3 Blacktop Analyses (red represents parking lots, purple represents the buildings they serve.)*

multifamily developments, and other high-intensity uses (Figure 3, Bottom). A review of major commercial developments around Southern Pines found that just ten sites account for approximately 95 acres of surface parking, equivalent to roughly twenty-four downtown blocks. Similarly, applying current parking minimums to the Downtown Historic District would require more than 2,100 parking spaces, roughly three times the existing parking, fundamentally altering its character (see Figure 4 below). These comparisons illustrate how existing regulations can drive outcomes that are inconsistent with the Town’s vision, reinforcing auto-oriented development patterns rather than the walkable, connected environments emphasized in the 2040 Comprehensive Plan. It also raises a practical question: what can the Town do to ensure that places with charm and identity continue to be built across the community?

Experiences from peer communities across North Carolina further demonstrate that parking reform can be tailored to local conditions while still achieving meaningful results. In Apex, a town of just over 84,000 residents, reduced parking minimums and flexible maximums were introduced, allowing developers some leeway while still preventing excessive parking.<sup>9</sup> Holly Springs, with a population over 40,000, is addressing its parking standards by establishing clearer minimums and maximums, reducing complexity, and improving predictability for developers.<sup>10</sup> Fuquay-Varina, with over 35,000 residents, has taken a more flexible approach in certain districts, allowing developers to



*Figure 4 Downtown Southern Pines Reimagined with Minimum Parking Requirements*

determine parking supply based on market demand, particularly in areas where maintaining walkable character is a priority.<sup>11</sup> Finally, Graham implemented maximum parking requirements for commercial uses in their city of over 19,000 people to reduce impervious surfaces and stormwater impacts, while maintaining minimums for residential uses to ensure adequate parking for residents.<sup>12</sup> Across these

examples, a common theme emerges: successful parking reform balances flexibility with clear expectations, allowing communities to reduce and even prohibit overbuilt parking while still meeting functional needs.



*Figure 5 Triangle of Opportunities for Keeping Southern Pines Southern Pines*

Ultimately, parking decisions reflect broader tradeoffs between economic development, walkability, and convenience. This dynamic can be understood as a “triangle of opportunities” (see Figure 5) where communities can realistically optimize for only two of three goals at any given time: abundant free parking, strong economic vibrancy, and a walkable, human-scale environment. Prioritizing abundant parking and economic growth often leads to dispersed, auto-oriented development with little sense of place. Emphasizing

<sup>9</sup> Town of Apex. (n.d.).

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.).

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.).

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.).

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walkability and economic vibrancy, by contrast, produces the kind of compact, mixed-use environments that define successful downtowns, where parking is more limited, shared, or located behind buildings. A third scenario, combining walkability with abundant parking, typically requires costly structured parking, making it less feasible for smaller communities and often resulting in paid parking systems. For Southern Pines, the question is not whether parking should exist, but how it can best support the Town’s long-term vision. By learning from peer communities and applying context-sensitive reforms, Southern Pines can move toward a model that prioritizes both economic vitality and walkable design, ensuring that future growth continues to reflect the character and charm that define the community.

## Conclusion

Southern Pines is at a pivotal moment in shaping how growth, development, and community character evolve together. This paper has highlighted a consistent and unavoidable tension: the desire to provide abundant, convenient parking while also fostering a walkable, economically vibrant, and distinctly local sense of place. Existing conditions indicate that current parking minimums often push development toward oversupply, consume land, increase costs, and limit opportunities for the kind of human-scale environments envisioned by residents and shared during the Town’s long-range planning efforts. At the same time, parking remains an essential component of daily life in a community that serves both residents and regional visitors.

The challenge, therefore, is not choosing one goal at the expense of another, but intentionally seeking greater balance between these competing priorities in a way that reflects Southern Pines’ identity and future vision. The “Triangle of Opportunity” clearly illustrates this tension: maximizing walkability, economic vibrancy, and abundant free convenient parking simultaneously is generally not feasible. However, Southern Pines is not faced with a binary choice; it can calibrate its approach to strike a balance that better aligns with the goals of the 2040 Comprehensive Plan.

Downtown Southern Pines already demonstrates what this balance can look like. By waiving off-street parking requirements within an eight-block area, the Town has enabled a walkable, economically active, and character-rich environment that serves as a regional destination. The sacrifice is that one must sometimes park further away than may be perceived as convenient. Meanwhile, areas outside of Downtown, particularly along the US 1 and 15-501 Highway corridors, reflect the opposite condition, where parking minimums have driven large expanses of impervious surface and auto-oriented development patterns, where walkability and human-scale development are sacrificed.

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