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A Resident Driven Organization

Lawrenceville United Testimony on R1A Zoning Text Amendments

June 20, 2020

Good afternoon. My name is Dave Breingan and I'm the Executive Director of Lawrenceville United. Our mission is to improve and protect the quality of life for all Lawrenceville residents. As an R1A neighborhood, I wanted to share some comments on the proposed zoning text amendments.

First, I want to commend Mayor Peduto and the administration for taking steps to improve pedestrian safety, enhancing neighborhood walkability, and promoting non-vehicular mobility. LU is completely in line with all of these goals, and with removing the minimum off-street parking requirement for single-family attached dwellings.

As City Planning's briefing demonstrated so well, front-facing off-street parking, integral garages, and their corresponding curb cuts do significant and long-lasting damage to the essential character of rowhouse neighborhoods. At their most basic level, the curb cut removes public on-street parking for a single private user, which reduces the overall supply of public parking in a dense neighborhood like Lawrenceville. At the same time, studies show that guaranteed, off-street parking makes residents as much as 45% more likely to drive their vehicle to a central business district, even in an area with good transit access like Lawrenceville. As the City's own Climate Action Plan aims, we should be making every effort to significantly reduce our vehicle miles traveled to reduce vehicle congestion and improve our air quality.

Curb cuts are also the enemy of equitable development. They destroy our neighborhood's walkability and accessibility, making it harder to get around -- especially for people with disabilities and families, who now have to worry about vehicles crossing the public realm of the sidewalk. Off-street parking further drives up the cost of housing at a time when neighborhoods like mine are desperately trying to stem displacement and stretch limited public resources to maximize new affordable housing.

Finally, off-street parking on primary streets prevents the ability to plant street trees, which our organization has worked hard at for years to expand, and it demotes the amount of neighborly interaction that occurs at the street level that's critical to our vibrancy as a community, especially in the face of rapid change.

With incredible development activity in Lawrenceville over the past few years, we've seen the damage done to entire blocks by new single-family attached dwellings that include integral garages. This legislation will improve matters by making it easier for community-minded developers to build contextual housing without having to seek a variance to do so. Unfortunately, these developers are an extreme exception. We have taken many, many development projects through our community process and we have pleaded with developers to not include off-street parking on primary streets. We've offered to support their parking variances, but developers have told us again and again that it's not the zoning code that's driving their inclusion of integral garages, but market demand. In order to get the price points they want from homebuyers, developers perceive that they must include off-street parking, and that's what's driving the construction of them.

Under this legislation, developers will face no incentives to change this behavior, and no disincentives to continue it, and community members will have no tools to oppose them when they continue to build them. Consequently, this legislation will not change, in any meaningful way, the continued construction of street-level integral garages, and the permanent damage they do to the public welfare and the essential character of rowhouse neighborhoods like Lawrenceville.



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If we're serious about the goals of this legislation, the City's Climate Action Plan, its Complete Streets policy, its Transportation Demand Management guidelines, and its Affordable Housing Taskforce, this legislation must go farther. We recommend that curb cuts along primary streets in R1A communities should be prohibited, or they should require a variance or special exception. The only way to curtail the continued expansion of curb cuts along the fronts of rowhouse blocks is to actively give the community the tools to prevent them. As it stands, these tools do not exist. By either prohibiting or triggering a Zoning Board of Adjustments hearing, communities will have the ability to prevent front-facing integral garages in new construction. Off-street parking accessed from the rear could still be permissible by right under the current maximum off-street parking standards (4).

Thank you for your consideration and I hope the Planning Commission will recommend including these revisions to City Council to improve this legislation to achieve the important goals of the City of Pittsburgh.

Please see enclosed for a more detailed explanation.



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Detailed comments on R1A zoning text amendments (2020-0198)

Background:

Front-facing integral garages and curb cuts in R1A zones do serious and long-lasting damage to the essential character of rowhouse neighborhoods and they're detrimental to the public welfare and to the overall goals of the City of Pittsburgh:¹

- **Curb cuts privatize public parking.** Introducing curb cuts for garage access and off-street parking removes public, on-street parking, which is often in high demand in R1A neighborhoods due to their density, for a single private user. At their most basic level, they privatize public space and permanently reduce the supply of public parking in urban neighborhoods. As the City's own Transportation Demand Management guidelines encourage, we should be promoting shared parking strategies where parking can be used by different users throughout the day to reduce the total number of parking spots.²
- **Curb cuts destroy our neighborhoods' walkability and make sidewalks less safe and less accessible.** The essential character of dense, walkable residential blocks are permanently impaired by introducing the ingress and egress of vehicles along the public realm and the pedestrian experience. It creates safety concerns for the community, as children and other residents now have to be concerned about vehicles coming and going while they walk down the sidewalk. As the Department of City Planning pointed out in their briefing to the Planning Commission, as many as 39% of deaths from accidental car back-overs occur in residential driveways, parking lots, and complexes.³ Very often, the driveways to accommodate these integral garages also introduce new slopes to an otherwise flat sidewalk, which can also impair accessibility for people in wheelchairs, people with disabilities, and parents with strollers.
- **Off-street parking drives up housing prices.** We share the concerns of City Planning that a single parking space per unit drives up the cost of an affordable housing development by 12.5% on average,⁴ when we know that the City of Pittsburgh already faces a shortage of over 20,000 affordable housing units that it's trying to address.⁵ Consequently, the current off-street parking requirement creates extra costs that deplete much-needed and already stretched public resources for affordable housing, while giving developers the ability to drive up costs further for market-rate projects, which only exacerbates the challenges of gentrification and displacement that so many R1A neighborhoods are currently experiencing.
- **Off-street parking undermines the City's goals to reduce single occupancy vehicle trips and further exacerbates our poor air quality.** Studies have shown that residents with guaranteed off-street parking are much more likely to drive to work—even when a viable transit option exists, as it does in most R1A neighborhoods in Pittsburgh. For instance, a study commissioned by Transportation Alternatives found that residents in areas with guaranteed, off-street parking were 45% more likely to drive to a central business district and 28% more likely to take a car to work in general.⁶ These extra vehicle trips cause a negative impact to traffic congestion in dense neighborhoods, in addition to contributing to Pittsburgh's already poor air quality. The City's own Climate Action Plan aims to reduce vehicle miles traveled by 50% per capita below 2013 levels by setting targets for commuter mode shifts away from single occupancy vehicles and towards public transit,

¹ 922.09.E.04 | [Code of Ordinances | Pittsburgh, PA](#)

² [TDM Guidelines for New Developments](#)

³ [Driveway Safety](#)

⁴ [Parking Requirement Impacts on Housing Affordability](#)

⁵ [Pittsburgh Housing Needs Assessment](#)

⁶ [Guaranteed Parking – Guaranteed Driving:](#)



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walking, and biking;⁷ yet the allowance and requirement of off-street parking in R1A neighborhoods works directly against that City priority and is detrimental to the public welfare.

- **Curb cuts and integral garages permanently prevent the ability to plant street trees.** According to the City's Climate Action Plan, the City's inventory of nearly 40,000 street trees play a critical role in reducing thousands of metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions, providing shade, reducing the heat island effect, and managing stormwater.⁸ With a typical curb cut at 13 feet wide,⁹ and a typical street tree pit at 10 feet wide,¹⁰ each curb cut permanently eliminates 1-2 street trees on a primary street, which have additional benefits to the community through beautification, slowing traffic, improving emotional and psychological health, and more.
- **Integral garages demote neighborly interaction** Instead of neighbors meeting along the street, new neighbors now pass into and out of their homes without ever having to walk along the street and having the casual, daily neighbor interactions that are critical to building community and vibrancy in rowhouse neighborhoods. They further prevent the "porch culture" that's so characteristic of R1A neighborhoods in Pittsburgh.¹¹

As development pressures increase across Pittsburgh, especially in dense neighborhoods like R1A zones, the City must ensure that this new development builds on and protects the character that makes our neighborhoods vibrant places to live--not undermine it. These integral garages on primary streets in R1A neighborhoods impose too great of social costs to the community to be permitted to continue unchecked.

On this proposed legislation:

- **We support the goals of this legislation.** We agree completely with Mayor Peduto's goals of "improving pedestrian safety, enhancing neighborhood walkability, and promoting non-vehicular mobility."¹² These zoning text amendments are a step in the right direction to advancing those aims. Under this legislation, developers seeking in our rowhouse neighborhoods would no longer face a disincentive to build contextual housing, and could build housing that reflects the character of the neighborhood by right.
- **However, this legislation doesn't go nearly far enough.** As the City Planning's own briefing demonstrated, curb cuts along primary streets in our R1A neighborhoods create significant and permanent negative impacts to the fabric of our communities. With market-rate residential development picking up in many R1A neighborhoods over recent years, the cumulative impact of each individual curb cut will continue to grow, fundamentally changing the character of entire blocks and communities. Consequently, bolder action is urgently needed to give communities the tools they need to ensure new development doesn't harm the existing neighborhood.
- **As it stands, this legislation will not change, in any meaningful way, the continued construction of street-level integral garages in R1A neighborhoods.** While the proposed zoning text amendments would end the minimum parking requirement for single family attached uses, making it easier for affordable housing developers to build new projects, the maximum parking requirement remains untouched. Although developers will no longer face a disincentive to avoid off-street parking when they don't want to provide it, the greater challenge to our communities is that market-rate developers face a much stronger incentive to provide off-street parking because of the demands of wealthier homebuyers. For developers to get their preferred price point, they perceive it beneficial or necessary to offer off-street parking in R1A neighborhoods, and so they will continue to

⁷ [Climate Action Plan | pittsburghpa.gov](https://pittsburghpa.gov/climate-action-plan)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ [Planning Commission](#)

¹⁰ [Tree Planting Request Form](#)

¹¹ [Stoop City: Celebrating Porch Culture in Bloomfield](#)

¹² [New Zoning Legislation to Ease Parking Requirements, Improve Pedestrian Safety and Mobility](#)



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build it if there are no disincentives otherwise. As this legislation stands, curb cuts would continue to be allowable by right along our most walkable rowhouse blocks, and communities would continue to have no tools to prevent them.

- **If we're going to set a goal as a City, let's actually meet it.**

Recommendations:

- **Curb cuts along primary streets in R1A should be prohibited, or require a special exception or variance.** The only way to curtail the continued expansion of curb cuts along the fronts of rowhouse blocks is to actively give the community the tools to prevent them. As it stands, these tools do not exist. By either prohibiting or triggering a Zoning Board of Adjustments hearing, communities will have the ability to prevent front-facing integral garages in new construction. Off-street parking accessed from the rear could still be permissible by right under the current maximum off-street parking standards (4).
- **Minimally, the legislation should incorporate the design standards for residential curb cuts in the RIV District.** Under the RIV's curb cut standards, garages and parking spaces must be accessed from the rear yard if available.¹³ When not available, shared driveways with one curb cut are encouraged. While this wouldn't stop curb cuts in parcels that lack alleyway access, it goes a step further than this current legislation and would improve it.

¹³ 905.04.G.2.e | [Code of Ordinances | Pittsburgh, PA](#)