

LA Weekly

Take This Car and Shove It

An Orwellian “100 percent parking reduction” rule quietly wends through City Hall

By [STEVEN LEIGH MORRIS](#)

Wednesday, August 29, 2007 - 5:00 pm



(Illustration by Ken Garduno)

AFTER WORLD WAR II, the city of Los Angeles figured it would be a swell idea to provide incentives to the local tire industry by dismantling what was then among the most comprehensive and enthusiastically used light-rail systems in the nation. What's good for business is good for the city, the tire companies said on their way to the bank, before the city paved over or shut down every passenger-train track from Mount Lowe above Pasadena, to Long Beach, to Santa Monica – wiping out the popular Red Car rail line.

While keeping the city's poky bus system, Los Angeles leaders of yore took away what planners would call “transportation alternatives.”

Or so the urban legend goes, a much-told but probably untrue tale about the Orwellian strategy of using free-market lingo – “good for business” – to restrict consumer choice and shutter the Red Cars. Sy Adler, professor of urban studies at Portland State University, has since shown that the deal wasn't so Orwellian: The Red Cars were abandoned after Angelenos took to their autos with such vigor that the rails lost riders.

But now, the sort of social engineers Orwell envisioned actually are in residence at City Hall as commuters piddle to work in cars. The worst traffic is probably on the Westside, where things move at about 3 mph during rush hour, in a sector of L.A. that lacks a subway and suffers from infamously slow bus service.

Perhaps taking inspiration from the old Red Car legend, the city's Planning Department is using free-market lingo to restrict consumer choices. The bureaucrats' aim: to get Angelenos out of their cars and onto a troubled, skeletal mass-transit system that's a pale reminder of past Red Car glory.

Under this scheme, veteran city planner Thomas Rothmann is pushing to restrict parking, even at condos and apartments. He hopes to render your car so burdensome, and your life around it so miserable, that for relief you'll use the frequent and efficient buses or subways – neither of which will actually exist in most corners of L.A. for 20 to 30 years even under best-case scenarios.

The city's euphemism for all this is “pedestrian friendly.”

At an August 9 Planning Commission meeting, Rothmann rolled out his latest of 10 proposed changes to the Municipal Code to address traffic and parking problems. Under current city code, developers may petition the powerful but obscure city zoning administrator, Michael LoGrande, to be excused from constructing parking for commercial and industrial buildings if city-mandated employee parking is shown to be unnecessary, and if viable parking alternatives are demonstrated.

But now, Rothmann proposes a move into uncharted territory, by pushing to allow such parking waivers for residential buildings. Under his plan, developers could win a “100 percent parking reduction” at condos and apartments citywide.

If approved by the 15-member City Council (no date for a vote has been set) and signed by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, Rothmann's antiparking rule, the so-called Parking Reduction Amendment, would let developers erect high-density dwellings and not build a single parking space as long as LoGrande feels residents have enough access to bicycle racks, van pools, bus stops or other “alternatives” to their cars.

Rothmann told the *L.A. Weekly* he also wanted to count pre-existing, off-site parking spaces as “alternatives” to cars, but the nine-member, mayorally appointed city Planning Commission nixed his idea, fearing that waves of renters and condo owners trying to park outside dense new developments might overwhelm L.A.'s existing parking.

The process Rothmann proposes is decidedly murky. For example, the city would use no written standards for deciding which housing developments could go without parking. Rothmann argues that citizens could appeal parking rollbacks to one of the city's seven regional planning commissions – also appointed by Villaraigosa.

Detractors argue that the entire process – no written standards, an administrator making case-by-case calls, unhappy citizens forced to petition and appeal, and final adjudication by mayoral appointees on obscure boards – leaves no elected officials accountable if City Hall's experiment leads to parking-shortage catastrophes. (Rothmann counters that developers already have a cumbersome process by which they can seek a dramatic parking reduction “variance” from a zoning administrator.)

Rothmann enthuses: “We're just taking what's already there and making it easier” for developers to cut parking and, he hopes, use the leftover space to build ever-denser apartments and condos.

THE LEAP OF FAITH BEHIND this strategy is tied to affordable housing, and city leaders' desire to create mixed-income neighborhoods. They argue that if L.A. doesn't have lower-income, transit-hopping service workers living in proximity to the bankers, lawyers and movie producers they're presumably serving, the city will consist of gridlocked ghettos for the wealthy like Marina del Rey. Villaraigosa, Rothmann and others believe that builders, if relieved of costly parking requirements, will use the savings to build affordable housing units.

But the entire scheme is based on the dubious premise that developers share City Hall's interest in mixing affordable housing into pricey neighborhoods. This is to be achieved by using "unbundling," described in a Planning Department summary of Rothmann's plan. The presumption is that living space and parking space today are bundled into a single package, and that L.A. residents, in effect, purchase or rent a dwelling with parking attached.

Rothmann aims to "unbundle" things, theorizing that parking-free housing will be cheaper, and Angelenos will not only embrace these cheaper dwellings, but, once living in one, will abandon their cars. However, a study by Cal Poly Pomona shows how resistant Angelenos are to mass transit: Fewer than 6 percent of area residents near subways use them to commute.

Nor does Rothmann's plan seem likely to stimulate very much cheap housing, with developers wary of erecting bizarre, parking-free apartments or condos in a city filled with workers married to cars.

Even the residents who use L.A. subways seem one headache away from abandoning trains. Subway rider Monica Semus lives in the Hollywood Hills one mile up a sharp incline from the Hollywood/Vine subway station. She spends \$5 a day to park in one of the last remaining parking lots, then hops the Red Line to class at Cal State Los Angeles.

But, ironically, the parking near the subway is being squeezed out by what Villaraigosa calls "elegant density" housing along Vine Street and Argyle Avenue. Soon, all parking on that lot will be reserved for owners and renters of about 1,000 new residential units, including 300 condos.

"I want to take the train," Semus says. "But if I can't park near the subway station, I'm back to driving."

Still, Villaraigosa's planning appointees insist that creating parking hell is the key to a pedestrian-friendly future. As Planning Commissioner Mike Woo explained August 9, "I think an ongoing problem we've had is our reluctance to use the stick as well as the carrot to change 'transit behavior.'"

All the carrots, however, are for the developers, while the sticks are for Los Angeles residents. In a letter from the Silver Lake Neighborhood Council to Gail Goldberg, director of the Planning Department, neighborhood activist Wes Joe appealed for empirical research before the city adopts Rothmann's highly speculative ideas. Joe fears that, if the city bothered to do its research, the Planning Department would find that the plan will merely make life miserable *and* gentrified.

"Given rising rents," Joe writes, "many of these new [Silver Lake apartments] consist of singles sharing a unit, each with his or her own car. The result has been parking congestion... So, in a sense we are already trying out the concept of reduced parking, and the result has been a diminished quality of life." Joe notes that residents of increasingly crowded Silver Lake still don't use transit: "No. [That's for] the displaced lower-income residents" who can't afford the new developments.

Joe reiterated his remarks before the Planning Commission. Commissioner Woo acknowledged that Joe made some good points. The commission then promptly ignored them all, unanimously endorsing Rothmann's legislation.

Rothmann is from New York, which he boasts "doesn't have any parking." But it does have buses and subways that get you where you need to go. Not true in transit-poor Los Angeles, where officials are eagerly advocating for less parking, but are years away from offering residents a serious alternative to their cars.