

The bigger picture

More housing and less parking mean less livability.
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Last week, the bad news for drivers in the city of Los Angeles was more than the price of gas. The city announced that it's doubling parking-meter rates and increasing the hours that meters are active. Furthermore, the city is also adding meters to streets where parking used to be free.

In and of themselves, these actions are unlikely to do more than raise some grumbles about the cost of everything going up. Even at as much as \$4 an hour in the most congested areas of the city, a meter is still less expensive than many private parking lots.

But what should cause more than a momentary gripe is how these new policies relate to a ballot measure that the City Council approved last week to put on the November ballot. The initiative would end restrictions on height and the number of units allowed in publicly funded low-income and senior projects.

What that means is more people in existing neighborhoods. And where would they park?

Under normal city rules, new developments face strict parking regulations. You build 20 condos; you must have adequate parking for the cars that will come with them. But with increasing frequency, the city has been giving "density bonuses" - which often relax parking requirements - in order to coax more "affordable housing" from residential developers.

This, in fact, is the reason for the ballot measure - to codify this practice of ignoring restrictions. The council says if the city doesn't change its policies, it will lose the opportunity to spend \$1.2billion in California housing bond money that voters approved in 2006.

That may be, but the city risks losing something even more precious than money if it forges ahead with easing building restrictions while giving little thought to the consequences for its livability.

Boosting parking-meter costs and changing housing restrictions seem distinct and unrelated policies - until you look at the bigger picture: higher costs for street parking, more cars competing for spaces, and more air pollution as drivers putter around, block after block, contributing to traffic congestion as they look for that ever-elusive space.

What's not to love about this?

The parking/housing density crunch is just one example of how narrow, piecemeal policy is killing Los Angeles. The city simply cannot keep growing without a vision for the bigger picture.