

CRAFTING POWERFUL PARKING REFORM MESSAGES



welcoming
neighbors network



Sightline
INSTITUTE



PARKING REFORM NETWORK

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Parking flexibility can unlock affordable home choices, revitalize beloved Main Streets, and remove barriers to local businesses.

But most Americans aren't aware of these opportunities or the costs of current mandates. People who don't yet have strong opinions on parking policy are **open to persuasion, with the right messaging.**

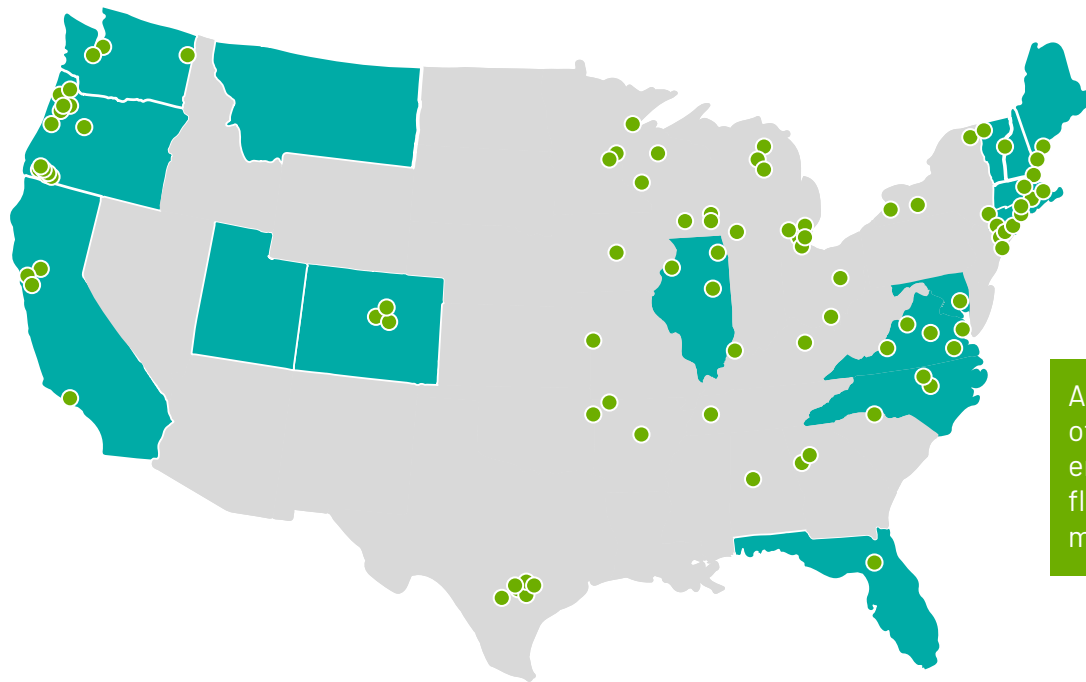
With research-backed and road-tested messages, lawmakers and advocates can build support for parking flexibility across race, class, and party affiliation.

We can make an obscure issue like parking policy feel urgent by pointing out the harms of today's mandates, compared to the benefits of parking flexibility for local people and the places they love. Emphasizing *flexibility* works because it acknowledges that communities do need parking, but that wasteful mandates for excessive parking come at the cost of other things people value.

Parking Reform Network, Sightline Institute, and Welcoming Neighbors Network combined messaging research and lessons from successful campaigns—in states from Montana to Washington, and cities as different as Denver, Hartford, Austin, and Gainesville—to develop this framework.

Parking reform advocates have scored wins across the country, in red and blue states, in big cities and small towns...

Statewide parking flexibility legislation has been passed in more than ten states to date.



At least one hundred cities of all sizes and politics have embraced parking flexibility, with hundreds more eyeing these reforms.

...but there's still more work to do!

The Parking Flexibility Framework

Define the PROBLEM: Waste and costs

Wasteful parking mandates prevent us from having what we want: more homes in a housing shortage, or a new daycare in a child care shortage.

1.

Illustrate the SOLUTION: People and places

Removing these mandates will allow us to have more community benefits, from affordable home choices to opportunities for small businesses.

2.

Offer clear ACTION: Parking flexibility

Local business people, homebuilders, and property owners should have flexibility to decide what parking makes sense for a specific site.

3.

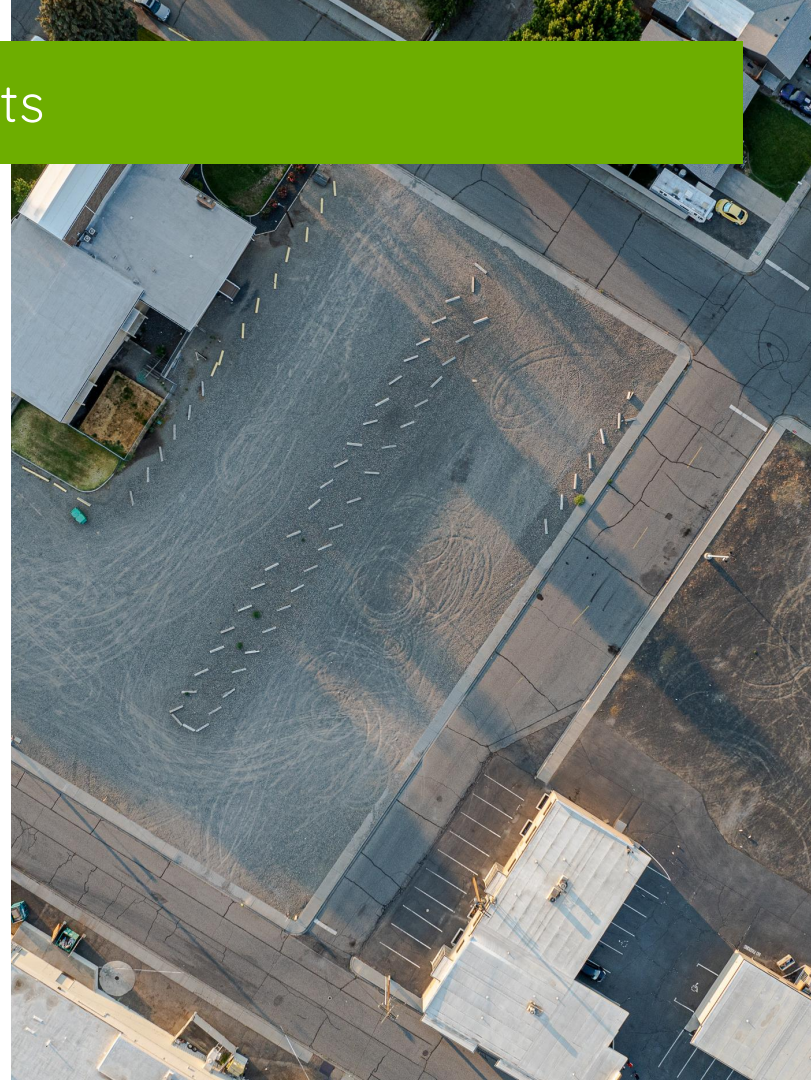
1.

Define the **PROBLEM**: Waste and costs

Excess parking is a lot more expensive and wasteful than most people realize, both in dollars and opportunities lost. Make the connection between the policy and the costs.

Use specific examples to define the problem:

- Each parking spot can raise rent by hundreds of dollars per month—whether residents use the parking or not
- Communities lose out on new housing when parking mandates eat up too much space or budget
- Asphalt traps heat and dangerously high temperatures threaten people's health
- Trees need to be cut down to comply with parking mandates
- Local businesses struggle to open when they don't have the space or budget for excess parking



2. Illustrate the SOLUTION: People and places

When people are asked to prioritize either parking or other kinds of community benefits, they prefer other benefits.

Highlight solutions that move the conversation from a zero-sum argument about parking being removed to a productive conversation about what we want to provide for people in our community. For example:

- More home choices that local workers can afford; more home choices that let seniors downsize in their community or let young families get a start
- Thriving Main Streets and revitalized downtown shopping
- More local businesses that offer essential services like child care
- People-friendly neighborhoods with parks and tree-lined streets to stroll with the dog or kids



87% of voters prefer more homes that working people can afford over more parking spaces.

85% prefer small, locally-owned businesses, shops, and restaurants over more parking spaces.

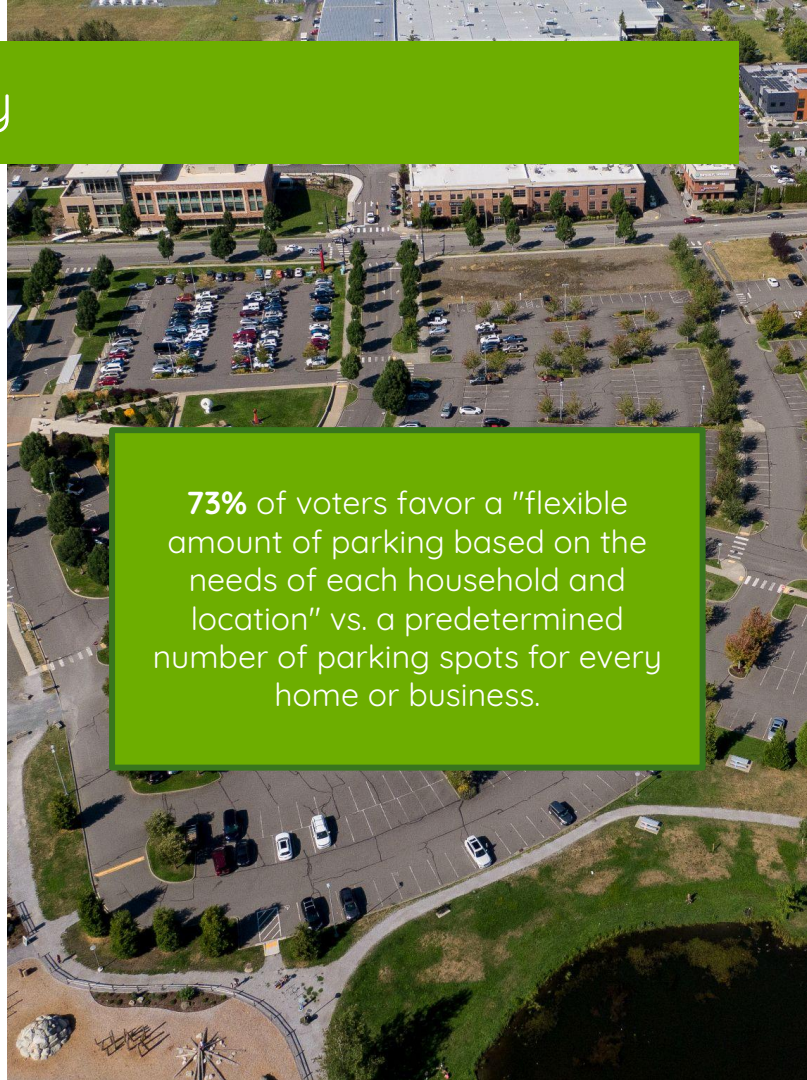
3.

Offer clear ACTION: Parking flexibility

When we define parking mandates as wasteful and costly, flexibility is a commonsense solution.

It's unproductive to debate what amount of parking is right. Instead, emphasize that it's wasteful to mandate excess parking, and that parking needs vary widely depending on the specific location or the type of housing or business.

Support for flexible parking requirements cuts across partisan and ideological lines, geography, education, race and ethnicity.



73% of voters favor a "flexible amount of parking based on the needs of each household and location" vs. a predetermined number of parking spots for every home or business.

Example: Problem - Solution - Action Messaging

PROBLEM

When we force locally-owned mom-n-pop shops, restaurants, and services to build big, expensive parking lots—especially in older storefronts and on smaller lots—they get blocked from opening or expanding or take their business further out of central, convenient locations in town.



SOLUTION

These small, local businesses are the heart of our communities, bringing people together and creating vibrant, inviting neighborhoods.



ACTION

We all benefit by dropping wasteful parking mandates and instead allowing more flexibility for homebuilders, businesses, and property owners to determine how much parking is needed for a specific site, location, and use. Parking flexibility means more local businesses can open and succeed.

This message about prioritizing small, locally-owned businesses and people-friendly neighborhoods was **convincing for 81% of voters**, across all demographics—with 42% saying it is "very convincing."

Research-Based Tips for Parking Flexibility Messages



1.

Tip: Focus on convenience and connection, not “car dependence”



Avoid leading with calls or implicit suggestions to drive less, reduce car dependence, or switch to public transit.

While important, these messages can put people on the defensive—most American adults drive or rely on cars, and when they’re thinking in “driver mode,” more parking sounds good and the prospect of less parking causes anxiety.

Switch the frame from “Where will I park?” to “What’s it like to live here?”

Emphasize choice, convenience, and connected communities. Paint a picture of safe, inviting neighborhoods where more homes, services, and shops are accessible and within walking distance.

2. **Tip:** Focus on real harms that impact people right now



Opponents of parking reform consistently raise "what if" scenarios about parking shortages and overflow. Redirect the conversation from abstract fears about what *might* happen in the future, to specific examples of how the rules *are harming people today*—and how we can undo those harms.

A top-performing message example from the research:

"Strict parking mandates can keep our communities from getting the services we need. For example, one local childcare center was ready to start building but had to be canceled because local mandates required parking they didn't need and couldn't afford. Parking flexibility means new daycares and other badly needed businesses and services can get a start and serve their community."

73% of voters find a **canceled daycare** message persuasive in support of parking flexibility reforms—with 40% finding it "very convincing."

3. **Tip:** Connect parking mandates to affordability



Parking mandates lead to higher costs in people's everyday lives: renters and home buyers end up paying the price for the construction of wasteful parking, whether they use the spaces or not. Connect the dots between today's status quo mandates and home prices, and explain that more affordable homes are possible with parking reform.

When describing economic costs, the more specific the price, the better. **It's more persuasive to cite an increase in monthly rent than it is to cite overall construction costs.** For example, "Each parking spot can raise monthly rent by over \$200 per month" is more convincing than "construction costs \$50,000 for each spot in a structured lot."

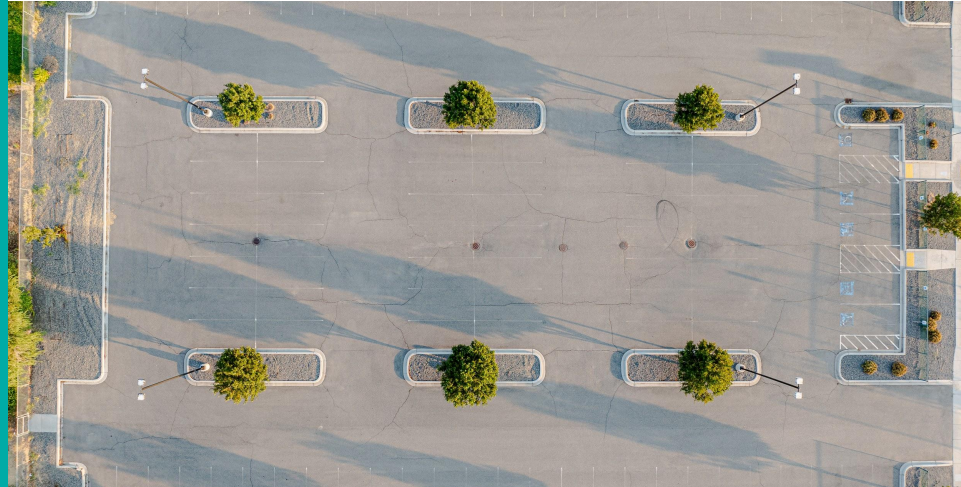
An argument that parking mandates cause cutthroat competition in the housing market is especially convincing to Black and rural voters.

4. Tip: Use visuals



Use vivid language to paint a picture of **big, empty parking lots, acres of asphalt, and sterile strip-mall development**. Contrast it with vibrant Main Streets, tree-lined shopping areas, charming neighborhoods, and inviting street scenes.

Use photos and illustrations as much as possible. Show a map of how much space parking wastes in a particular city, rather than simply stating a percentage.



5. **Tip:** Emphasize how people see and feel the environment



When discussing the environment, focus on what's tangible in people's daily lives, such as:

- Trees being cut down
- Pollution in local waterways because parking lots collect stormwater
- Dangerous temperatures in hot weather due to asphalt trapping heat
- Air pollution from sprawling development and traffic

These are more persuasive than abstract appeals about the global climate impacts of car dependency.

A top-performing message example from the research:

"Mandated parking adds paved spaces and contributes to sprawling development that leads to increased local traffic and air pollution."

79% of voters say that arguments about protecting trees, sprawling development or pollution are convincing.

6.

Tip: Local homebuilders, business people, and property owners know what's needed for their project



People recognize that status quo mandates can be arbitrary, and a majority of voters favor flexibility for parking that meets a site's unique needs, location, and use. Position local homebuilders, property owners, and business people as the ones who know best what parking is needed to make their project successful.

When possible, elevate individual, trusted community members like small-scale homebuilders and business owners who can tell stories about being held up by wasteful parking mandates.

Nearly **three quarters of voters** believe that parking rules should be flexible to suit a specific location, site, and use.

DOs and DON'Ts: FRAMING

Allow parking flexibility	Eliminate parking mandates
Wasteful parking mandates	Parking minimums; parking requirements
Wasted space, empty parking lots, acres of asphalt; prioritize home choices over waste and pavement	Car storage; homes for people, not cars
Local homebuilders, property owners, business owners; more home choices, local business investment	Developers; development
Neighborhoods where you can live near jobs and shopping, classic Main Street neighborhoods	Walkability, walkable

Focus on flexibility and safe, connected neighborhoods

Avoid using jargon or keeping the conversation on cars



Appendix: Example Messages

Examples of top-performing language

77% of voters find this argument convincing. It's especially persuasive among Black voters, Democrats, and suburban, small town, and rural voters.

LOCAL BUSINESSES When we force locally-owned mom-n-pop shops, restaurants, and services to build big, expensive parking lots—especially in older storefronts and on smaller lots—they get blocked from opening or expanding or take their business further out of central, convenient locations in town.

WASTEFUL AND OUTDATED MANDATES Most parking mandates are based on 1960s-era guesses about future needs. They don't reflect what communities or businesses really need today—and the result is overbuilt parking that wastes space and adds costs. We need the flexibility to update our rules to address today's costs, lifestyles, and community needs.

PROTECTING BELOVED PLACES Parking flexibility helps protect what's unique and inviting about our communities, from charming town centers to historic shopping streets and downtown buildings. By allowing updates and new uses for older buildings and businesses, we can make it possible for beloved neighborhoods to invite new businesses and investment, including renovations and new storefront openings, without knocking down adjacent buildings for new parking lots. Parking flexibility encourages local businesses in cherished historic buildings and protects unique, local places from unneeded asphalt.

HOME PRICES AND RENT Today's rules that force overbuilt parking add costs to housing and take up space that could go to the homes local workers in our community need. When there are not enough homes to rent or buy, we get cutthroat competition and higher prices. More parking flexibility makes more housing possible and helps control local housing costs.

Top performing message overall (80% found convincing) and persuasive across all demographics and subgroups.

Messages in action: Local environmental effects

Pointing to local impacts that people can see and feel is more persuasive than making abstract appeals about global climate impacts.

PROBLEM: If we think about the kind of place we want to live, we picture trees and greenery, parks, and inviting neighborhoods to stroll with the kids or the dog. The last thing we picture is empty parking lots. But to comply with local parking mandates for new homes and businesses, trees often need to be cut down and green spaces paved. More asphalt creates dangerous heat islands and collects stormwater runoff, leading to toxic pollution in local waterways.

SOLUTION and ACTION: Switching from wasteful mandates to flexibility for parking based on the needs of each home, building, and location will help preserve trees in our community, keep local air and water cleaner, and reduce health risks from dangerously high temperatures.

This message was particularly effective in increasing the belief that parking mandates do more harm than good for communities, having a +21 point effect size overall in randomized controlled trials.

Messages in action: Community costs

Use specific, sympathetic stories about community services and characteristics that most people value, like mom-n-pop shops or picturesque Main Streets.

PROBLEM: Our neighborhoods thrive when local people have convenient access to jobs, child care, small businesses, and other needed services. But wasteful parking mandates make it hard to start a small business, often requiring overbuilt parking, and not taking into account the practical needs of residents and customers. For example, plans for one local childcare center had to be canceled because space and budget didn't allow for dozens of required parking spaces—most of which would have sat empty.

SOLUTION and ACTION: Allowing flexibility for local businesses to choose what actually works for them means new daycares and other important community services can be built, and that people in our communities have needed amenities, services, and businesses nearby.

A message about a canceled local daycare project performs well across demographics and is particularly effective with Black and Latino voters, with 46% of voters in both groups finding the message to be “very convincing.”

In randomized controlled trials, this message had a +19 point effect size with suburban respondents in increasing their support of parking flexibility.

Messages in action: Housing affordability

Explain how parking mandates drive up home prices and rent, by adding costs or blocking housing entirely.

PROBLEM: Our neighborhoods thrive when we have more homes of all shapes and sizes that people who work here can afford. But wasteful parking mandates make it difficult for communities to add the home choices local people need. Space, construction, and materials for parking are expensive, and mandating more than people need drives up rent and home prices. *One additional spot can add over \$200 to monthly rent, whether it's used or not.*

SOLUTION and ACTION: Instead of wasteful mandates, giving homebuilders and property owners flexibility to add the parking people actually need would open up more opportunities for home choices that our local workforce can afford.

Housing cost messages performed well across all voters, but they did particularly well among specific demographic groups.

56% of Black voters and 40% of rural voters found housing costs arguments to be “very convincing,” making this argument the strongest performer across both of those demographic groups.

Methods



Initial Research

Partnering with FM3, Global Strategy Group (GSG), and Grow Progress, we conducted extensive research in the fall of 2024 on housing and parking, including two rounds of qualitative and survey research, among general population US voters and an audience of influencers—a proxy sample for politically-engaged community members and lawmakers. This included a national survey with 1,211 respondents, qualboards with 25 respondents, an influencers survey with 500 respondents, and an online journal of influencers.



Expanding on Parking Research

After the initial phase of message testing, further research was conducted in 2025 focused specifically on parking policy messages. This included a national survey conducted by FM3 with 832 respondents, including oversamples of Black and Latino voters, as well as in person focus groups among suburban renters and homeowners and small-city conservatives and progressives, and qualboards among small town and more rural community voters in Oregon and Washington state.



Testing Final Messages

Finally, the top-performing messages from initial rounds were tested through randomized controlled trials (RCTs) on the Grow Progress platform in the fall of 2025, with 2,800 respondents total seeing one of the final parking messages, or a placebo message. Message success was measured by the persuasive effect across a set of success questions relating to approval of parking flexibility policy proposals.