

Zoning By-law Review of Minimum Parking Requirements



Discussion Paper April 2015

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Introduction

The purpose of this Discussion Paper is to:

- Examine the history, rationale and consequences of the existing parking minima
- Consider the evolving planning goals of the City that are focused on increasing uses of sustainable transportation options to provide less reliance on the use of automobiles for urban travel
- Consider some of the arguments for and against reducing existing parking minima, and
- Examine the options for reducing or eliminating parking minima under certain circumstances to meet evolving planning goals.

After reading this paper, we hope that interested stakeholders will join the discussion.

The City of Ottawa Zoning By-law includes minimum parking requirements that require a certain number of automobile parking spaces to be included with any new development or change of use. The actual number is generally proportional to the scale of the development: the more floor space, dwelling units or customer seats, the more parking stalls are required by the zoning.

These requirements are often called the "parking minima" which is the term used in this paper.¹

With some exceptions, Ottawa's parking minima for most land uses have not been fundamentally revised since 1964. It is increasingly clear that the existing parking minima are working against many of the City's key planning goals.

Recognizing this, the Official Plan (as amended by OPA150) supports reducing or eliminating parking minima in those parts of town where walking, cycling and/or transit use are viable alternatives to driving. The Minimum Parking Requirements review is intended to implement that direction. (See Appendix A for the exact wording from the Official Plan).

It is worth highlighting several topics that are not under consideration as part of this review. The Minimum Parking Requirements review WILL NOT:

- Affect the rules governing on-street and municipal parking lots, including meter rates, time limits, parking restrictions after snowfalls and similar rules. These topics are outside the purview of zoning and are governed by different legislation and by-laws.
- Limit the amount of parking that is allowed to be included in a development. Parking maximums will be the subject of a later study. The Minimum Parking Requirements

¹ The Zoning By-law also includes a maximum permitted parking ratio for certain uses and in certain circumstances. However, the minimum parking ratio is much more prevalent and is the focus of this paper.

Review is concerned only with the minimum amount of parking that must be provided with a development, not the maximum amount that may be provided.

- Propose increases to the minimum parking requirements in the zoning, as doing so is not supported by the Official Plan.

Background

Parking minima were introduced in most North American cities in the decades after the Second World War. This was done in reaction to a period of post-war prosperity where many more households bought cars, and whole new car focused suburbs were being built to house growing families. The explosion in car ownership caused chaos in cities originally built to the much smaller scale largely defined by pedestrians, streetcar lines and low-rise buildings. The sudden change in technology, society and the economy drove the need to provide enough space to store thousands of vehicles when not in use.

In Ottawa, parking minima were included in the city's first comprehensive Zoning By-law AZ-64 enacted in 1964; the Town of Eastview (Vanier) followed in 1968; and the other municipalities in what is now Ottawa generally included parking minima from early in their development. The parking minima in force today are the result of combining and harmonizing these various by-laws in a single document, Zoning By-law 2008-250, following the municipal mergers into the current City of Ottawa in 2002.

The parking minimum for any given development today varies according to its location within the city. The Zoning By-law distinguishes between:

- The Central Area (a smallish area that includes Parliament Hill, the Central Business District, Tunney's Pasture and the Byward Market)
- The inner urban area (generally comprising the rest of the old City of Ottawa and Vanier)
- The suburbs (old Gloucester, Nepean, Kanata, Orleans, Stittsville etc.), and
- The rural area (including villages such as Greely, Metcalfe, Navan etc. and the remainder of the City's territory.)²

Parking minima also vary depending on the land use (e.g. retail store, restaurant, school, apartment dwelling).

Finally, various exemptions and reductions also apply in certain limited circumstances:

- Certain land uses have a somewhat reduced parking minimum (e.g. offices near a rapid transit station)
- Some development may be partly exempt from parking minima (e.g. the first 150m² of development on the ground floor on a Traditional Mainstreet)

² These areas are identified in Zoning By-law as Areas A, B, C and D respectively, and are shown as Schedule 1 to the Zoning By-law 2008-250. Technically Tunney's Pasture is not part of Area A, but the parking rules for the Central Area apply to Tunney's so for simplicity we have grouped it as part of the Central Area for the purposes of this discussion.

- Some development is entirely exempt from parking minima (e.g. change of use in a designated heritage building, or low-rise residential development up to twelve units in much of old Ottawa).

The resulting set of rules represents an attempt to manage a complex and often conflicting set of pressures. On the one hand, there is the desire to provide adequate on-site storage for motor vehicles, and on the other, the need to control infrastructure costs and tax rates, preserve built heritage, promote walking and transit use, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and a number of other objectives.

The pros and cons of parking minima

The case for parking minima

Some arguments and perspectives expressed in favour of keeping the existing parking minima (or even raising them) include:

- ***If new development does not include on-site parking, people will park on the side streets.*** In some cases, the concern is that this will draw added traffic onto residential side streets. In other cases, people are worried that careless on-street parkers will block their driveways; and in still other cases, residents currently enjoy the free use of the street parking on their streets (either for themselves or for occasional visitors) and do not want to lose this.



Figure 1: On-street parking in a residential neighbourhood.



Figure 2: On-street parking in a residential neighbourhood.

- ***Parking is already at a premium downtown.*** Many motorists feel that finding a parking space downtown is often difficult, especially at times of peak demand. Some object to having to pay for on-street parking or spaces in a commercial parking garage.

This perspective argues that if new development were required to provide ample parking, these problems would be mitigated or eliminated.

- **Existing downtown businesses rely on the existing, finite supply of parking.** The concern is that allowing further development without parking will make the existing spaces unavailable to their customers. Some business owners are concerned that it is already hard enough to compete with suburban shopping centres, where parking is not an issue. The fear is that putting further pressure on an already-limited supply of parking will hurt their businesses.
- **Notwithstanding the City's other planning goals, the reality is that some people have little or no choice but to drive their cars.** The concern here is that while encouraging walking, biking and transit is a laudable goal and one that is supported by many people, transforming the city will take a long time. Until that transformation occurs, the city has to work for people in real time. Some people cannot walk long distances, work jobs that require unusual hours or frequent driving during the workday, or otherwise find that bringing their car downtown is a practical necessity.
- **New developments are typically so big; they bring a sudden influx of cars into the neighbourhood overnight.** This point of view acknowledges that gradual, small-scale intensification also brings a gradual increase in walkability and transit viability, to some extent offsetting the need for parking, and allowing the parking ecosystem to adapt. However, much of the current development industry is oriented towards big projects (e.g. large-format stores, high-rise condos, etc.) and a single development brings in a lot of cars all at once.
- **The current parking rules have worked reasonably well for 50 years.** Some people feel that the current system works well enough and if it isn't broken, why fix it?

The case against parking minima

- **Parking minima are biased towards solving one specific problem at the expense of most other considerations.** That problem may fairly be described as "Assume that almost everybody will arrive by car, and make sure that there is always enough parking for all of those people to park on-site for free, even on the busiest day of the year." The resulting rules do address that particular problem, but the result is development with much more parking than is needed, in most places, most of the time.
- **Parking minima are designed for suburban greenfield sites, but hinder urban redevelopment.** Parking minima were introduced at a time where vast new tracts of land were being opened up for suburban development. Parking minima are relatively easy to meet if you're building on old farmland at the edge of town. The land is cheap, subdividing off a single large development parcel is straightforward, and since the density is low, you're not really expecting anyone to walk or take transit. Conversely, these rules are much more problematic on an older urban site, where the surrounding land is already divided and developed, more expensive and difficult to assemble, and where the population density is much higher and walking and transit are much more realistic options.

- **Distorted urban design.** A pedestrian-scale mainstreet, with continuous street frontages and low-rise, mixed-use buildings close to the street, becomes impossible when space must be provided for parking. Buildings must be spaced apart to allow access to parking areas (or, worse from an urban design standpoint, parking just goes in front of the building!) The need for parking stalls and back-out aisles leave little space for the actual building; smaller urban lots become unusable and remain vacant for years because they're too small to provide any parking at all. When something does get built, the need to put parking underground often forces a much larger building with enough leasable floor space to absorb the cost of building a garage. See **Appendix B** for aerial images of pre-automobile development and parking-dependent development.



Figure 3: Commercial development from before minimum parking requirements applied. Mixed-use, multi-storey buildings addressing the street were typical.



Figure 4: Commercial development under minimum parking requirements is typically a single-storey, low-density development behind and addressing a parking lot.

- **Parking causes traffic.** Research has shown that all other factors being equal, a guaranteed parking space at the destination results in a much higher automobile mode share for trips to that destination. Less directly, parking takes up space and makes access more difficult, less convenient and more unpleasant for non-drivers, which encourages people to drive who otherwise would not. At the margin, some people who might otherwise not even own a car, end up buying one because the built form makes life too difficult without one and since the costs of owning a car are mostly front-loaded, there is little incentive not to use the car more—further adding traffic that wouldn't have existed if they hadn't felt the need to buy a vehicle in the first place.
- **Intensification comes all at once instead of gradually.** Surface parking takes up a lot of space, and small-scale intensification quickly runs into the limits imposed by minimum parking requirements. This prevents the kind of gradual change that allows the neighbourhood and transport network to adapt alongside it. But eventually, the pressure for housing and commercial space is enough to support a large mid-rise or high-rise building that can absorb the cost of providing several levels of underground

parking. This sudden intensification is typically a shock to the area, upsetting the neighbours and disrupting the transport network much more than a gradual evolution would have.

- **An unlevel playing field.** The added costs of parking minima put small businesses at a disadvantage. While a large corporation or a chain retailer may have the capital resources to better absorb the costs of providing parking (or the costs and procedural delays of getting a variance), a small restaurateur or independent retail store often cannot afford it. The result is a market where businesses compete less on product or service quality, and more on the ability to absorb the costs of parking—even in dense urban neighbourhoods where most of the clientele will arrive on foot.
- **Everything costs more.** Developers and builders are forced to acquire more land and build parking lots, or to build underground or stacked parking. These substantial costs must be passed on to the tenants, homebuyers and businesses using the space who, in turn, pass them on to consumers. In desirable neighbourhoods, parking minima severely limit construction of housing and commercial space, inflating prices and driving up rents and housing prices. This does not only harm renters, property owners are affected as well as their property taxes go up based on their nominal home value. High rents for commercial space put pressure on main streets, making basic retail and services less economical and favouring high-margin, luxury businesses.
- **Urban blight.** Most people don't want spend much time in a parking lot, much less live next to one. The extensive parking areas mandated by parking minima create environments that are less attractive, less pleasant, and in some cases less safe than if the parking supply were less of a priority.



Figure 5: Multi-level parking garage

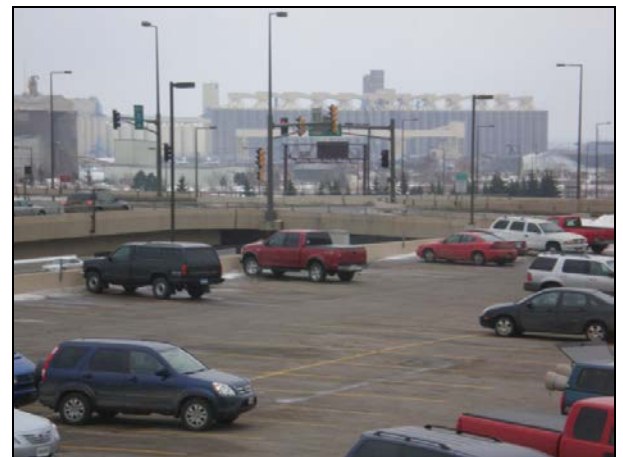


Figure 6: Parking lot

- **Parking minima are regressive.** One in six households in Ottawa has no vehicle at all. The average passenger vehicle costs about \$9,000 a year to own and operate, and many households cannot readily afford this expense. Vehicle ownership poses a financial hardship for an estimated one-quarter to one-third of all households. By requiring all development to include parking, the added cost is imposed on everyone, even though it is only the more affluent citizens who benefit from it.

- **Increased municipal costs and taxes.** Because parking encourages driving, more and wider roads are needed to accommodate the increased traffic. Maintenance and clearing of roads, reduced efficiency of public transit, and other aspects of automobile-driven sprawl must be paid for through higher taxes. Excessive parking also discourages the use of public transit, undermining the large public investments in projects such as Light Rail Transit (LRT).

Options for new parking minima

The Official Plan gives direction to reduce or eliminate parking minima in those parts of Ottawa where public transit, walking and/or cycling are very viable transportation modes. In practical terms, this means:

- In most of the inner urban area (very roughly the old City of Ottawa and Vanier; Wards 12 through 18, plus part of Wards 7 and 11; or Area B in the current Zoning By-law)
- On and near Traditional Mainstreets and transit priority corridors; and/or
- Within an 800m walk of O-Train, Transitway and LRT stations

Taken together, these areas describe the study area.

There are several different options for reviewing the parking minima that apply to the various parts of the study area. These various options are presented below:

Option 1: Abolish parking minima in all or part of the study area

Some jurisdictions have gone so far as to abolish all parking minima for all uses, regardless of scale or circumstances. One example is the Borough (Arrondissement) of Plateau-Mont-Royal, an inner-urban borough of the City of Montreal, which no longer requires parking for any development within its boundaries. Other jurisdictions abolish parking requirements for certain uses or in certain areas. Toronto exempts all restaurants from parking minima along its rapid transit corridors and commercial mainstreets. Many cities (e.g. Moncton, Winnipeg) require no parking for development in and around their downtowns.

Following this approach in Ottawa would result in no parking being required for any development near a rapid-transit station; in the inner urban area; and/or on a Traditional Mainstreet. Parking would still be *permitted*, but it would not be *required* as part of new development.

This approach could be applied to the entire study area. Or, it could be applied only to development fronting on Traditional Mainstreets such as Bank Street or Somerset Street; only to development within a certain distance of a Transitway station or LRT station; or within all or part of the inner urban wards generally.

Option 2: Exempt small scale development from parking minima

Under this approach, a small development would not have to provide any parking at all. This approach recognizes that small-scale intensification gradually makes the neighbourhood more pedestrian- and transit-friendly, one small development at a time, offsetting the increase in parking demand by making alternatives to driving more attractive. It also recognizes that having to provide any parking at all can make a small site or development completely unviable. It also helps to level the playing field somewhat for small businesses. Conversely, big developments, because of the large and sudden influx of activity/people that they bring to an area, would still have to provide parking (and are big enough to be able to absorb the cost of putting it underground.)

In most of its territory, Ottawa does not currently offer exemptions for smaller development; parking rates are calculated starting with the first unit of floor area or the first dwelling unit. However, there are some exemptions for very small development in limited circumstances. For instance, an individual commercial use on the ground floor of a building on a Traditional Mainstreet is not required to provide parking for the first 150m². This still subjects nearly half of the commercial spaces on those streets to a parking requirement, and makes further development difficult; the fact that the exemptions only apply to small uses on the ground floor is a further constraint.

Some cities take a broader approach. Toronto exempts most commercial uses under 200m² (2200 square feet) from parking requirements anywhere in the city, not just on mainstreets. Montreal exempts up to 500m² (5500 square feet) worth of commercial uses in any given building, again not just on mainstreets but throughout most of the city. (As a point of reference, 95% of the businesses on Ottawa's Traditional Mainstreets are less than 500m²; the few that are bigger, tend to be much bigger.)

Option 3: Reduce the minimum parking ratios

Option 2 deals with the question of how large a development must be to warrant any required parking at all. Option 3 asks the question: once it is decided that parking will be required, how much is required?

For instance, inner-urban Ottawa's current zoning requires 2.5 parking spaces for every 100m² of office space, or one space for every 40m². If that rate were reduced to e.g. 1.5 spaces per 100m², a 10,000 m² (110,000 sq.ft.) office building would have to provide 150 parking spaces as compared to 250.

Ottawa has some reduced parking ratios in place today; the differing rates for Areas A, B, C and D are an example. Residential development near a rapid-transit station has its parking rate

reduced by up to half. Some non-residential uses are subject to slightly (5%-16%) lower parking ratios near rapid transit stations.

In Montreal, the parking ratios are considerably lower, with rates for commercial uses on the order of one space for every 200m². (As a result, the 10,000m² office building mentioned in the example above would require just 50 parking spaces, rather than 250 as in Ottawa. As well, Montreal boroughs further reduce the parking requirement by 50% for development near a Metro station (depending on the borough, "near" means from 150m to 500m away.)

Option 4: *Specific exemptions and reductions for certain circumstances*

This is a catch-all for any exemption or reduction that is not specifically based on the size or location of the development, but which serves a desirable planning goal. Ottawa's current exemption for designated heritage buildings is an example: the City wants to preserve the character of these buildings and make it easy to re-use them instead of tearing them down, so the obligation to provide parking which might otherwise have made their re-use difficult is removed. Other circumstances may warrant a reduction or exemption from parking requirements.

Option 5: *Do nothing*

This option leaves the existing parking minima in all or part of the study area unchanged. Ottawa's parking minima for non-residential uses are broadly consistent with those of many Canadian and U.S. cities

Option 6: ???

There are surely options that we haven't thought of here. We welcome your thoughts and suggestions regarding how Ottawa's zoning around parking minimums may be amended.

How to provide input

We encourage all interested parties to get in touch with us with their views for, against and about parking minima.

Email: tim.moerman@ottawa.ca or minimumparking@ottawa.ca

Regular mail: Review of Minimum Parking Requirements
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Website: ottawa.ca/minimumparking

Appendix A: Official Plan Policies

The City of Ottawa Official Plan as amended by OPA150 provides the following direction regarding parking:

2.3 Providing Infrastructure (Parking)

29. The City will manage the supply of parking in areas with intensification requirements and other areas served by the Rapid Transit and Transit Priority Networks to achieve the following objectives:
 - a. To produce short-term parking that supports the needs of local businesses, residents, institutions and tourism destinations;
 - b. To limit the supply of long-term parking in a manner that balances transit ridership objectives with the needs of automobile users;
 - c. To support intensification and minimize the amount of land devoted to parking through measures such as providing parking underground or in structures incorporating other uses and arrangements to share parking among land users;
 - d. To continue to regulate both the minimum and maximum parking requirements for development within 800 metres walking distance of existing rapid transit stations and future rapid transit stations identified in an Environmental Assessment, or within 400 metres walking distance of the existing Transit Priority Network. Regulations may vary and respond to the requirements of specific sites and areas.
 - e. The City may undertake reviews of the Zoning By-law with respect to parking requirements, appropriate to implement the broader goals of this Plan.
30. In intensification areas, on-street parking will be pursued to facilitate local shopping and economic activity through such means as reducing the number, location and width of vehicle access routes and by combining access to parking and service areas from side streets or service lanes.
31. In establishing requirements for on-site parking, the City will have regard to the current provision of rapid transit and transit priority measures in the area and to the potential impacts on the use of nearby roads with respect to:
 - a. Increases in demand for on-street parking and the adequacy of the supply;
 - b. The need to facilitate local shopping and economic activity; and
 - c. The ability to provide new cycling facilities as set out in the Ottawa Cycling Plan.
32. In intensification target areas, the City will:
 - a. Establish maximum requirements for on-site parking and reduce or eliminate minimum requirements;

- b. Pursue on-street parking through such means as reducing the number, location and width of vehicle access routes and by combining access to parking and service areas from side streets or rear service lanes.
- 33. Outside intensification target areas, the City may establish maximum requirements for on-site parking and reduce or eliminate minimum parking requirements:
 - a. Within 800 metres walking distance of a rapid transit station or within 400 metres walking distance of the Transit Priority Network; or
 - b. Within 400 metres walking distance of a Traditional Mainstreet where the requirement to provide parking, the small size, dimensions and other characteristics of existing lots preclude a change in use or small-scale intensification.
- 34. The City will review the Zoning By-law with respect to parking requirements in different areas of Ottawa in order to implement the policies of this Plan.

4.3 Review of Development Applications

- 4. The City may, in keeping with the direction in Section 2.3, establish maximum requirements for on-site parking and reduce or eliminate minimum requirements in
 - a. intensification target areas; or
 - b. within 800 metres walking distance of a rapid transit station; or
 - c. within 400 metres of the Transit Priority Network, inside the Greenbelt; or
 - d. within 400 metres of a Traditional Mainstreet, inside the Greenbelt;in particular where the small size, dimensions and other characteristics of existing lots preclude the ability to provide on-site parking for a change in use or small-scale intensification.

Appendix B: Urban form with and without parking requirements

The following illustrations, taken at the same scale, help to illustrate the kinds of environments that are possible with and without minimum parking requirements.

Figures 7 and 8 show Wellington Street West in Westboro, which predates minimum parking requirements. Residential and commercial land uses are more closely integrated. The smaller lots leave little space for on-site parking, but contribute to a more continuous street facade that define the street edge and create an attractive, human-scaled public realm. The built environment encourages walking and transit, making parking less of a priority.

By contrast, Figures 9 and 10 show Carling Avenue at Richmond Road, developed after 1964 when minimum parking requirements came into effect. Large areas are devoted to asphalt and land uses tend to be segregated. Buildings are spread out and oriented away from the street, producing little in the way of a human-scaled public realm. Although well-served by public transit, this environment does little to encourage pedestrians, cyclists or transit users, encouraging more automobile use and making parking more essential to the development.

Pre-automobile development: Wellington Street West

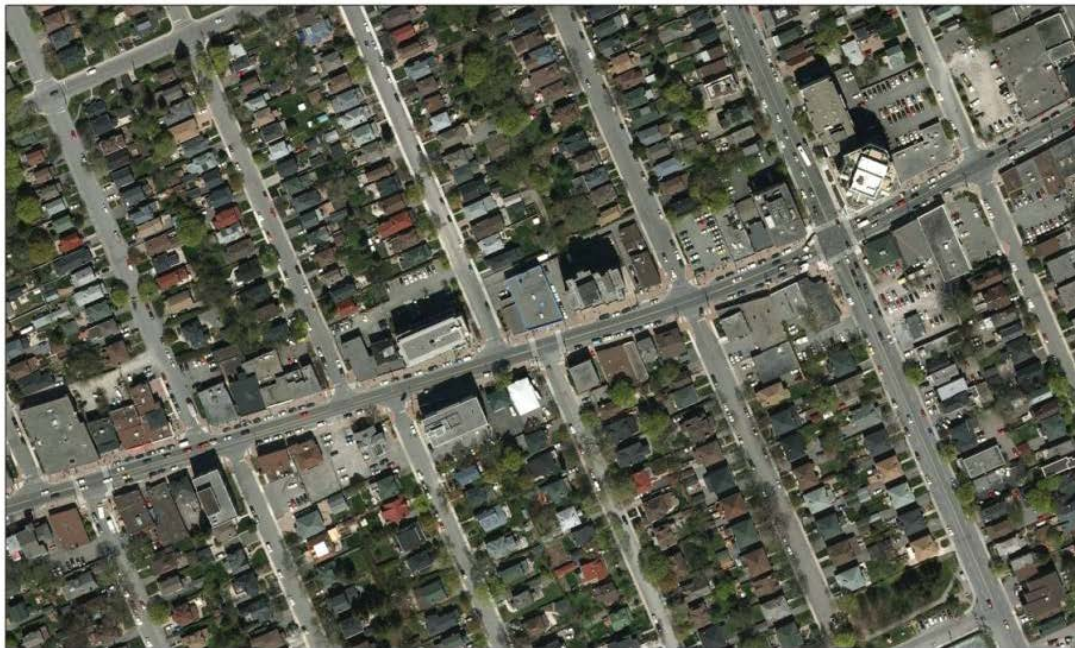


Figure 7: Wellington Street West, aerial photo

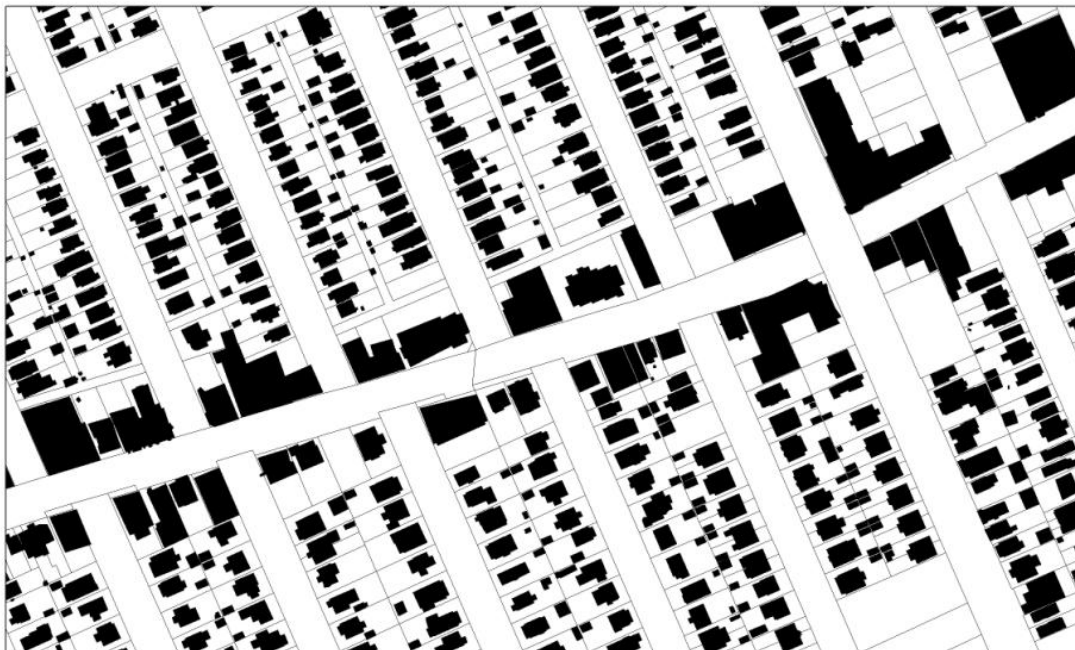


Figure 8: Wellington Street West, building footprints and lots

Parking-dependent development: Carling Avenue at Richmond road



Figure 9: Carling at Richmond, aerial photo



Figure 10: Carling at Richmond, building footprints and lots