Balancing Needs for Parking Spaces and Community Places: A street with parking lots separating buildings has been likened to a toothless smile. Not only does such a street lose the aesthetics and safety of a street that is lined with doors and windows, the parking lots create an incentive to drive rather than walk.

A number of communities are encouraging infill development and are filling in their toothless smiles with new housing and retail. However, developers complain that parking requirements can make infill development financially unfeasible, particularly in more dense locations.

Copycat parking standards: A recent survey commissioned by the EPA revealed that most planners rely on neighboring cities and national handbooks to determine parking requirements. However, it is clear that these generic parking standards are not keeping pace with the complexity of modern, mixed-use development.

Currently, we have a tendency to provide more parking spaces than are needed. One study of ten California cities revealed that even at peak times, lots were filled to a mere 56 percent of their capacity. Nevertheless, it is standard practice for urban planners to set minimum parking requirements to satisfy maximum parking demand, according to UCLA Professor Donald Shoup.

Given today’s land use patterns, a wise planner will take time to look at the development type, size and time of use. While a large theater will generate the need for a great deal of parking in the evening, those parking spaces might be shared with daytime patrons of shops or businesses.

Development density and design also influence parking needs. Research shows that each time residential density doubles, auto ownership falls 32 to 40 percent. If transit is available, neighborhood stores are close by, and streets are walkable, even less parking will be required. Demographics should also be considered—income and age both influence auto use.

The High Cost of Parking: Providing too much parking carries a high fiscal price tag, in part because it means that land cannot be used for a higher purpose. However the cost of a parking space depends to a great extent upon the cost of the land.

The Transportation and Land Use Coalition calculated that in higher density situations, each on-site parking space could reduce the number of new housing units or other uses by at least 25%. This reduces the income that might be derived from the property and reduces property tax revenues to the City. It also means that spaces that might be used for public purposes are filled with cars, reducing property values and tax revenues.

The environmental costs of large parking lots is becoming increasingly obvious, as the volume of polluted urban runoff and the frequency of flooding continues to increase and the air becomes increasingly polluted by vehicle emissions.

Some Cities Create New Rules: Local elected officials and planners know that merely suggesting a reduction in parking requirements is likely to face a roar of opposition. However, a number of communities have managed to reduce parking requirements using techniques that vary from context specific requirements to pricing strategies.

Milwaukee has some of the lowest city-wide parking ratios in the country. Rather than relying on the Institute of Transportation Engineers’ standard of over 3 spaces per thousand sq ft of retail, Milwaukee cut that down to 2 spaces required per thousand sq ft of retail.

In Milwaukee’s downtown zone, there is no minimum parking requirement except for high-density housing. There, only two spaces are required for every three units. The city discourages surface parking lots and dictates that at least 50 percent of the ground floor of parking structures be used for retail. And parking credits are offered for uses near transit. On-street parking and shared parking also count as parking credits.

The City of Seattle reduces minimum parking requirements for affordable housing projects, senior housing and housing for the disabled, car-sharing, and downtown locations. Parking requirements are also reduced for mixed use, walkable neighborhoods.

The City of Palo Alto will defer up to 50% of the required space for parking as a landscape reserve where the need for parking is not clear. One apartment development deferred 22 of the 95 parking spaces required by the city code, turning the land into a family play lot, a barbeque area, and picnic benches. After 15 years, the landscaped area remains – no new parking proved necessary.

The City of Boulder, CO reduced the demand for parking by implementing a policy that dis-
Pioneer Square — A former Portland, Oregon parking lot is now a community gathering place.

Could Current Land Use Codes Be Bad for Your Health? A new study has linked land use patterns and the health implications of reduced physical activity and increased air pollution. According to Professor Lawrence Frank: “Our findings are consistent with literature suggesting that current laws and regulations are producing negative health outcomes.” While many communities have adopted a smart growth or livable communities vision, land use policies are inconsistent with stated policies.

Research shows that the more time children spend outdoors, the higher their activity level. Weekly soccer practice probably isn’t enough to avoid the health effects of inactivity, including childhood obesity, depression and attention deficit disorder.

Increased densities don’t necessarily mean less outdoor play space. Some of the oldest cities in America, such as New York City and Philadelphia, actually have more natural areas in them than some of the newer cities that are supposedly less dense. It’s all a matter of appropriate design.

The LGC is currently working with the Department of Landscape Architecture at UC Davis to put together some basic guidelines for elected officials. This fact sheet will address how to make safe places for kids to play, both in the suburbs and the city.

For more information about Richard Louv’s research on children and nature, visit: www.thefuturesedge.com.