

Packing In the Houses, But Not the Parking

Dense Developments Skimp on Spaces

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The Washington Post

Monday, May 19, 2003, Page. A.01

You can move to the Pinecrest neighborhood and tee off on the nine-hole executive golf course, relax in the gazebo after a tennis game and watch herons glide across a sparkling pond.

Just don't plan on bringing your Chevy Silverado.

After taking tape measures to roads, parking spaces and vehicle bumpers for two years, the Pinecrest Community Association decreed this month that the Silverado, the GMC Savana, the Chevy Avalanche and six other vans, SUVs and pickup trucks can no longer park on the streets of the Fairfax County development. The vehicles are too big for Pinecrest's narrow roads and pull-in parking areas -- anywhere from 1.2 inches to 49.7 inches too long and 2.5 to 12.1 inches too wide.

In Pinecrest, as in many newer "in-fill" sites in the county, developers intent on squeezing in the maximum number of houses have received local approval to build roads narrower than the state standard. The approval comes with one caveat: They must paint the curb yellow on one or both sides of the street, banning parking so that emergency vehicles can pass.

The result is a lot less parking, or none, for today's fleet of family cars and super-size SUVs.

"The board felt we needed to be very specific," said Peggy Knight, who wrote the new parking rules for the 860 condominiums, townhouses and single-family houses in Pinecrest, west of Alexandria. "When people have great big, long vehicles parked next to each other, perpendicular to the curb, the guy who's trying to pull out his car can't see."

Pinecrest quietly wrote the regulations during a broader update of the community's bylaws, which were sent to homeowners. But many car owners were surprised once they had waded through the fine print.

The parking crunch is also occurring in communities of \$600,000 colonials, where vehicles are hanging off truncated driveways onto sidewalks. Some homeowners joke that they can throw a party only for their immediate neighbors because they don't have to drive over.

"We have a county ordinance that specifies how many parking spaces per unit," said John Byers, a Fairfax planning commissioner for the Mount Vernon area. "The thing is antiquated. It was created in the days when a family had one car. All of a sudden you've got three, four, five vehicles . . . and no on-street parking."

County planners are now reviewing parking regulations to see whether developers should be required to provide more space.

Many new houses in Fairfax come with ample garages. But they're often used for storage, and some have shared driveways, making them off-limits to parking by owners as well as guests.

"You have people here who have scaled down, and they come with a lot of furniture they keep in the garage," said Jo Brown, who retired to a townhouse in the Random Hills development west of Fairfax City. The community has a wooded dog park and hiking trails, which Brown prefers to more parking: "Rather than all that concrete, I'd rather have the trees."

In the Clairmont development in Silver Spring, Pulte Homes is putting in five-foot-long driveways to fit 42 townhouses on 2.2 acres. To prevent vehicles from spilling over onto the sidewalks, the homeowners association requires that garage doors be closed, with the car inside, whenever a vehicle is not coming or going, according to the builder. "If you kept me to a larger driveway, I could only build 20 homes," said Steve Coniglio, Pulte's land acquisition manager. He noted that the project is two blocks from the Wheaton Metro station.

Some Fairfax homeowner groups have turned into de facto police forces, contracting with towing companies to remove vehicles from fire lanes.

"We hate doing it, but we had to," said Bob Heittman, vice president of the Windsor Park homeowners association in Franconia. "Four years ago, we probably had 650 cars. Today, there are 1,200. Where do we put them?"

The 2000 Census documented Americans' ongoing love affair with their wheels: More than 72,000 households in Fairfax, for example, have three or more vehicles.

Many local governments allow, even encourage, dense developments on private streets, whose layout and landscaping offer more of the feel of a neighborhood than do state roads. What's more, narrower roads discourage speeding, safety experts say.

In Virginia, state roads must be at least 34 feet from curb to curb, leaving plenty of room for parking. Private roads can narrow to 22 feet, but then no parking is allowed. Wider private streets allow parking on only one side.

In residential areas, Fairfax requires builders to provide a minimum of two spaces per single-family house, 2.3 for a townhouse and 1.6 for a condo. There is no requirement for visitor parking. After a developer receives approval for a project, as many as 20 county agencies scrutinize detailed site plans. But officials acknowledge that they do not take into account the effect of fire lanes on parking.

"We don't really have a lot of flexibility," said Michelle Brickner, director of the office of site development services. "The zoning ordinance says you must provide a certain number of spaces. The only conflict is if in the practice of day-to-day living, people need more parking than what the code requires."

Said Greg Riegler, a land-use lawyer who represents several area builders: "People want housing with less maintenance, and that's a lifestyle equation that leads to houses being close together."

But the county hasn't addressed this more-urban type of development. Do you require acres of parking for the one guy that has a graduation party in June, in exchange for trees and open space?"

Fairfax's review of its parking regulations was prompted in large measure by Supervisor Sharon S. Bulova (D-Braddock), who moved into a four-bedroom house west of Fairfax City last fall only to discover yellow curbs lining her street. The house has a two-car garage but shares a driveway with the neighbors. If a car is parked there, no one can get in or out.

"It's not until you buy a house that you discover this," she said. "I just wasn't aware. I had always assumed that county staff would look at issues of parking when they're reviewing plans."

Bulova said she chose the Cloisters community because its small lots require minimal upkeep. But now she finds that a service truck or visitor must park two blocks away. "We fell in love with our lot," she said. "But after experiencing this, I'm not sure I would approve a development like this again."

Builders say ample parking requires trade-offs.

Steven Alloy, president of Stanley Martin, a Washington area builder, noted that Fairfax prefers private streets for condos and townhouses. "For cars to go both ways and have them park on both sides," he said, "you're talking about a ton of asphalt" in place of trees and other pedestrian-friendly features.

Parking and fire lane regulations can be confusing even for those who enforce them. A homeowner down the block from Bulova recently challenged having fire lanes on both curbs in front of his house, where the street is wider. County workers came out and sandblasted away the yellow paint on one side.

The county and a developer goofed again in Armistead Park, a development off Route 50 east of Fairfax City where street parking on cul-de-sacs was allowed for years. Then a homeowner complained that trash trucks couldn't get by. The fire marshal discovered that Centex Homes had not painted fire lanes.

"People were up in arms," recalled resident Stewart Gordon, who has a five-bedroom house, a Chevy Suburban and a minivan. "All of a sudden, they took away our parking spots."

Adding to his unhappiness, Gordon recently received two letters from the U.S. Postal Service telling him not to block the mailbox out front by parking in the fire lane. But he wasn't the offender.

Fire Battalion Chief John White, the head of the county's fire prevention services, said the Armistead case "sort of fell through the cracks," adding, "We've become a lot more cognizant of [the need for coordination] so we don't have another Armistead."

Centex officials did not return phone calls.

In Pinecrest, townhouse resident Steve Keyes paid \$466 last month to replace the bumper on his GMC Sierra with a smaller one. Without it, the pickup truck was two inches too long, by the community association's reckoning, to park on the street.

"I was pretty upset," Keyes said, adding that someone from the group then told him that the restriction may have been excessive. "I said, 'Are you sorry enough to give me my money back?'"

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