



Driven: Ben Lee by the strip of L.A. stores he wants to turn into a deli.

## PARKING BREAK?

### City of L.A. may ease space requirements

By **HOWARD FINE** Staff Reporter

**B**EN Lee's dream is to open a New York-style deli on a family-owned parcel that's now home to three small businesses.

But Lee's dream has turned into a nightmare. He has spent nearly three years battling over parking. Because his site near the Beverly Center doesn't have enough spaces for cars, he asked for special clearance from the city of Los Angeles. He eventually got it, but then neighbors filed suit to block the project. His deli remains unbuilt.

"I've spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on this and I'm still in limbo," Lee said.

However, a proposed city ordinance could spell relief for Lee, and hundreds of

*Please see GOVERNMENT page 34*

property and business owners like him. It would create districts with their own more flexible parking requirements.

Now, each business is required to have a set amount of parking spaces, depending on the type of business, its square footage, etc. Each parking space must be owned by the business.

Under the proposal, the businesses wouldn't necessarily have to buy or build so many spaces. City officials could, for example, determine that a district already has enough spaces; districts near subway stops could especially benefit from that change. Or the city could allow businesses to lease spaces nearby instead of buy them or build them right next to their shops.

Within the parking districts envisioned in the ordinance, for example, property owners like Lee could convert retail space to more parking-intensive restaurants without necessarily having to build or buy additional parking spaces.

Likewise, developers of mixed-use projects would not necessarily have to provide two or more parking spaces per residential unit, thus saving hundreds of thousands of dollars in construction costs.

The aim, planners said, is to boost economic development along the city's aging commercial corridors, especially in areas near transit stops. Too often, they added, those trying to put up new projects or open a business give up because it's too hard to find enough parking spaces under the current code.

Homeowner groups generally oppose the ordinance, saying it would reduce the number of stalls. What's more, easing onsite parking requirements would force customers and tenants to park on residential streets and worsen congestion as cars roll around the block looking for spaces.

"There are no assurances written into this ordinance that the parking burden won't be shifted to the community at large," said Wendy-Sue Rosen, president of the Brentwood Homeowners Residents Coalition, who testified before the Planning Commission in opposition to the ordinance. "You will see spillover parking into neighborhoods and more disruption of traffic patterns."

### Long effort

The commission is slated to vote on the proposed ordinance later this month. If approved, the City Council could consider it this summer.

Developers and business groups have long pushed for reductions in the city's parking requirements because they see them as a roadblock to new projects and businesses.

The situation was aggravated 20 years ago when the parking code was overhauled and different parking requirements were established for different types of commercial establishments. Now, new restaurants must provide more parking spaces than liquor stores or dry cleaners. If property owners don't have enough spaces or can't buy enough of them in nearby

lots or structures, they need to seek a variance, which amounts to an exemption from the rules.

That process often takes a year or more, and can cost tens of thousands of dollars in application fees and consultant costs.

"If you want to meet the (onsite) parking requirements, the only way to turn a store into a restaurant is to open up a small burger shack," said Mott Smith, principal with L.A. land-use consulting firm **Civic Enterprise Associates**. Smith also develops infill projects.

The family parcel that Lee wants to redevelop is home to a battery store, a tile and carpet center and a dress shop that front Third Street. He would replace them with his deli. Since the city's parking code required his eatery to have 42 spaces — 38 more than he has — he got a variance that allowed him to lease those spaces across the street at the Beverly Connection shopping center. The code would have required him to buy the spaces, but the Beverly Connection was not interested in selling.

Getting the variance meant he had to go through a public hearing and wait for months for the city to act.

As soon as the city granted the variance, several nearby residents appealed the decision and filed a lawsuit seeking to block the deli from opening.

"There are already too many bars and restaurants on that stretch of Third Street, and it has

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**Fresh Approach: Co-owner Corey Wilton in front of his Four Cafe in Eagle Rock**

led to all sorts of spillover parking problems on the surrounding residential streets," said Cary Brazeman, a member of the Mid-City West Neighborhood Council that represents the area. Brazeman is not involved in the lawsuit.

Brazeman, a former executive with **CB Richard Ellis Group Inc.** who owns a public relations company, also said he represents L.A. Neighbors United, a small coalition of homeowners in opposing the parking district ordinance. He has publicly opposed another planning effort to overhaul the city's antiquated zoning code.

Brazeman calls the proposed parking ordinance a blank check for city planners to reduce parking requirements and said the real problem is an overall lack of parking in certain areas of the city.

"You can waive away parking requirements, but you can't make the need for parking just disappear," he said.

But Lee said that with a parking district, he would have been able to lease the spaces he needs, would not have had to go through the variance process and would have added to the local work force.

"It would have been much easier to open and by now, I would be employing 40 full-time workers," he said.

### **Construction costs**

Current parking requirements also drive construction costs for developers. For example a two-bedroom condominium requires at least two parking spaces at a cost of \$30,000 to \$45,000 per space. Reducing that to one space per unit could cut construction cost of a 20-unit condominium building by up to \$1 million.

"Right now, the parking requirements limit how much revenue can be generated by a project," said Michael Matthews, chief operating officer of **Nuñez Group**, a development group in Arcadia that is focusing on infill projects in Los Angeles and surrounding cities. "If you build parking above ground, it limits the number of units, while the deeper you go below ground the higher the cost per space."

Once the parking costs are calculated, Matthews said some projects don't pencil out. Then the developer has to decide whether it's worth the trouble to seek a city variance.

"That's an incredibly difficult process," he said. "You have to work with community groups that want either more or less parking. And there are some people in those groups whose real aim is to kill the project and the parking requirement is just the means to do it."

Matthews said developers won't automatically slash the parking spaces in their projects if the ordinance is approved. They still have to please potential buyers.

"People will still want their cars and access to guest parking spaces," he said. "You have to judge what the market will bear."

Under the ordinance, city planners would have considerable discretion in setting up parking districts, determining the actual parking requirements and laying out additional steps business owners and developers would have to take to meet parking demand.

Proponents point to an experimental parking reduction district that's been in place for four years along a one-mile stretch of Colorado Boulevard in Eagle Rock. Buildings there are decades old and have had little or no space for onsite parking.

But there's plenty of street parking on Colorado that wasn't being used. The city set up a district so new businesses would not have to purchase additional off-street parking spaces or seek variances.

Instead, businesses put money into a special account that the city uses to maintain the meters and on-street parking spaces. The city determines how much each new business pays, based on the number of parking spaces its customers use.

One business that opened last year within this parking district was **Four Café**, a farmers market-inspired eatery owned and operated by husband-and-wife team Corey and Michelle Wilton. Corey Wilton said he was mildly annoyed at having to pay \$800 into the city fund, but said it was preferable to seeking a variance.

"It took us seven months to open this restaurant," he said. "There's no way we could have lasted the six to 12 additional months to get a variance. So I'd much rather pay the \$800 than have to go through that."