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Condos can skip parking mandate

Portland allows a new development to have fewer spaces and the city's first car-sharing program.

By *KELLEY BOUCHARD* Staff Writer

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The trend of organized car sharing, which started in Europe in the 1940s and spread to larger U.S. cities in the last decade, has arrived in Portland.

The City Council unanimously approved a zoning change Monday that will allow Peter Bass to build a 26-unit condominium complex at Danforth and High streets with 42 fewer parking spaces than are usually required by city ordinance.

The four-story, modern brick building will have a 14-space garage on the first level, including two spaces dedicated to shared cars that will be owned, insured and maintained by the home-owners' association.

It is Portland's first officially sanctioned car-sharing program and an example of the city's effort to allow less parking as a way to encourage residents to have fewer cars, especially downtown.

"I strongly endorse this project and the kind of thinking it represents," said Councilor Daniel Skolnik. He said the shared cars will help reduce energy consumption, parking demand and traffic congestion in Maine's largest city.

Plus, Skolnik said, with prices of \$140,000 and up, the condos will offer a rare opportunity for affordable homeownership in downtown Portland. If the project is successful, he said, the city should encourage similar developments in the future.

Danforth on High Condominium will be built on 7,656 square feet of city land that the council agreed to sell to Bass in November 2006.

Chosen through competitive bidding, Bass will pay \$150,000 for the land, which has been a parking lot for offices in the area.

Designed by David Lloyd, the building will have 26 studio or one-bedroom condos that range from 450 to 880 square feet. Bass said that having fewer parking spaces allowed him to offer more housing at a lower cost. He said it costs about \$20,000 per space to build a parking garage, and that cost is passed on to the homeowner.

Without a zoning change, Bass's project would have needed 56 parking spaces, said Alexander Jaegerman, Portland's planning director.

The association will be expected to finance at least 20 percent of the car-sharing budget through residents' monthly condo fees, Jaegerman said.

The remaining cost will be covered by user fees. Residents will have to sign up to reserve a car and pay \$7.50 per hour to use a car, Bass said. Residents will be allowed to have cars, but the developer believes many will be happy to save an average of \$7,000 per year by not owning a car.

"Our hope is that through our outreach and marketing of this project, we'll be able to find people who want to live without a car," Bass said.

Johnicholas Hines, 26, is one of those people. He lives in Portland and takes the bus every day to his job as a computer programmer at Idexx in Westbrook. He told the council that he'd

like to buy one of Bass's condos, which will be on a major bus route.

"I'm committed to living without a car," Hines said outside the council meeting. "Low-cost housing is difficult to find, especially if it includes parking. Zoning that requires large amounts of parking legislates dependence on independent transportation and gasoline."

The building also will have parking for 26 bicycles.

Car sharing started in Germany in the 1940s and has spread across the world. It reached many larger U.S. cities, from San Francisco to Philadelphia, in the last decade. Some car-sharing programs are privately sponsored. Others are publicly financed or commercially operated, such as Zipcar, a company that provides car-sharing services at Bates College in Lewiston and at the University of Maine in Orono.

In addition to shared cars, Bass's project will offer a shared guest room that residents can reserve when they have company.

The project still needs site plan and subdivision approval from the Planning Board. Construction is expected to start in April and finish by fall, Bass said.

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