

A Superior Site Layout

How to maximize square footage and build units that rent

By Jamie Lindau

Finding the ideal site for your self-storage project—one that boasts visibility from the road, easy access and the proper zoning—may seem like the hardest part of the development process. However, difficult decisions arise *after* you find your land, too. Now it's time to figure out the best site layout, which sounds easy, but there are many things to consider.

Every new owner wonders how to maximize his site to acquire the most net-rentable square footage. I call this the “economics” of the site. First and foremost, it's critical to understand your city's requirements on the maximum building coverage allowable on your parcel. For example, some cities enforce a 30 percent maximum-coverage constraint, which means your buildings can only cover 30 percent of the overall land. In this scenario, you'll need a lot of acreage or you may have to consider building multi-story to make your project economically feasible.

Once you know the rules on land coverage in your city, you'll have to make some tough choices. It seems ideal to maximize your site for the greatest profit, but you'll have to make sure the units you're building are easily rentable.

Single or Multiple Stories?

First decide if your location warrants a multi-story design or single-story construction. The latest Self Storage Association demand study indicates the most important feature to a customer is the ability to drive-up to his unit. This conservative layout is easy to rent, but the design eats up a lot of your land. In this situation, you'll only get around 14,000 square feet per acre. Consequently, your parcel will have to be large enough to allow enough net-rentable square footage to make the project feasible.

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To maximize his site, this owner has one large three-story building and two single-story buildings with no interior hallway.

Another option is to build very wide single-story buildings ranging from 80 to 200 feet wide. This design maximizes the square footage without the high costs of building multiple stories. The wider buildings also minimize the number of driveways needed. Today, this is the most popular way to build, since the design increases the net-rentable square footage by more than 20 percent in comparison to the all-drive-up version, and you can get about 18,000 square feet per acre.

If the zoning on your lot allows for a small setback, it would be advantageous for you to build the first building directly on the lot line to increase your overall coverage. To make interior units desirable to prospective renters, you'll most likely need to make them all climate-controlled.

At this point, you may have a general idea about how you should lay out your site, but it's imperative to get more detailed in your design. You may find the original layout you planned will not actually work.

Devil in the Details

A land survey will indicate the direction the buildings should face and the proper drainage to minimize excavation costs. After your survey, you'll have to hire a civil engineer to do a grading plan and determine if the city will require a retention pond. Retention ponds can vary in size from .25 acre to more than 2 acres, depending on your location.

Also consider the amount of green space and number of parking stalls the city requires. Parking can be a concern, as some municipalities require numerous spaces, which will cost you in square footage.



This aerial view illustrates how to use wide buildings to maximize coverage constraints.



A 200-foot-wide, single-story building can help you maximize square footage.

Because of all of these constraints, many owners start out thinking they will develop a single-story project, but soon realize the amount of land they have will not provide for enough units to make the project work. In this case, consider building a multi-story project. A two-story facility, for example, will provide about 70 percent more net-rentable square footage than a single-story.

Building Up

For multi-story projects, an elevator is essential to meet the service and convenience renters demand. And if you're going to build a project with an elevator anyway, why not build three stories instead? A three-story building will get more than 140 percent more net-rentable square feet in comparison to a single-story. The downside is building codes require that sprinklers be installed on three stories, increasing your construction costs.

Most building codes allow for four-story buildings, and some owners choose that route to maximize space. Some codes will even allow a five-story building. The problem is the type of construction needed for this design changes often. The project will have to be built in such a way that all the walls and floors are fire-rated. The only way to do this is with conventional concrete walls, flooring and beam construction, where all beams are fire-proofed. This design sounds expensive, and it is. Therefore, most owners shy away from building too high.

Ten years ago, the typical storage site featured two-story buildings with lifts or maybe elevators. Today, sites often feature a three-story building in the center with single-story buildings around the perimeter. Costs are lower with this design because you only need an elevator in one building and you maximize the number of drive-up units. Nonetheless, I don't recommend using any multi-story buildings if competition in your market consists of only single-story drive-ups.

Multi-story building also involves more difficulty in getting past the architectural review board. The board is mainly concerned with the aesthetics, so you'll find yourself spending a considerable amount of money on enhancements like facades and mansards to keep the look of the buildings in line with what the board requires.

This and That

Finally, there are other minor issues to consider when laying out your site, such as gate placement. I recommend installing one gate that allows both access and egress. Keep in mind customers should be able to get to the management office without needing to go through the gate.

Also take snow issues into consideration. Lay out your buildings to the north and south to ensure the sun melts the snow that accumulates on the roofs. If your buildings have to face east and west, purchase buildings with a lean-to roof so the water drains on the south side.

The layout of a storage site can be more complex than it seems. The trick is to maximize your land while creating a facility that is enticing to customers. Do your homework before making those tough decisions, and your layout should be on the money.

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