LivablePlaces Update

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Emerging Trends in Community Planning and Design www.lgc.org

County Looks Beyond Piecemeal Planning:
Massive population growth pressures in Southern California and high housing costs are driving people to look for housing in the inland areas. The County of Riverside, located directly in the path of new development, is looking at proposals from four different developers for an overwhelming 25,000 new housing units.

Rather than simply looking at each developer’s proposal independently, the County’s planning director decided that these separate parcels needed to be planned in unison, toward the creation of a livable and fully integrated whole, with streets and paths that connect and needed services located where they are accessible to all residents.

The planning department, with the active participation of the public health department and others, made a list of everything needed for an economically, environmentally and socially sound community: educational facilities including early childhood education, transportation options including biking and walking, childcare facilities, fire protection, and the like. The effort also looked at the cost of these items and how to pay for them.

Traffic congestion is already a major problem in the county and the County’s budget is inadequate to pay for a solution. Because the addition of 25,000 new housing units could only lead to more gridlock, a decision was made to assess developers $6,000 per housing unit to pay for transportation improvements. While several developers strongly objected, the County concluded that the only other alternative would be a housing moratorium.

To help the community decide what form new development might take, the County is holding workshops on Livable Communities. The predominant form of growth in the area has been auto-dependent, large-lot, single family homes isolated from services. Builders feel comfortable building this way and some are reluctant to change. Through the workshop process, builders as well as the entire community are coming to understand that demographic changes (the aging population and increase in younger households without children) call for a diverse housing mix.

According to developer Randall Lewis, “Riverside County is taking a visionary leadership role in creating livable communities. Their collaboration with the development community has been very positive and will result in much better places to live.”

Cities Look To Zone Out Junk Food: In 1996, the City of Calistoga, CA passed an ordinance that bans all “formula restaurants,” defined as a restaurant that has standardized menus and a name, appearance, and logo identical to another restaurant located elsewhere. This ordinance was adopted for economic reasons — the City wanted to preserve the uniqueness and small-town charm of its commercial uses and assure its continued attraction to tourists. The ordinance effectively eliminated Burger King, McDonald’s and other fast food restaurant chains.

The nation’s obesity epidemic has led cities to look at banning fast food restaurants for another reason — the health and welfare of their citizens. A 2003 survey found that 24 percent of school children in New York were obese and 19% overweight. The City of New York is looking at changing their zoning laws to ban or limit fast food restaurants, particularly in low-income areas where fast food is the only choice.

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Some have questioned the legal authority of a city to limit or ban fast food restaurants, however case law indicates that cities do have the legal authority to do so. The Center for Law and the Public’s Health at Johns Hopkins and Georgetown Universities released a report identifying several courts that have upheld zoning laws restricting fast food restaurants. According to an Associate Professor in the School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University, governments often use their zoning powers to restrict business — for example, keeping industrial plants from residential neighborhoods. Protecting the public health is an argument in the history of zoning laws and regulations in the U.S. that can be a winning argument for zoning out fast food restaurants.

Expanding Waistlines Creep North: Recent data from our neighbors in Canada provide further confirmation that there is a link between suburban lifestyles and obesity.

A report titled, Regional Difference in Obesity published by Statistics Canada employed data from a 2004 Canadian health survey where researchers measured the height and weight of 10,000 Canadians. The results show that Cana-
dians living outside metropolitan areas have a higher probability of being overweight or obese.

In metropolitan areas, obesity was an already-alarming 20%, but outside the cities the average rose to 29%. Doctors stated that the differences were probably a result "of everything from the automation of farming to urban sprawl — too many people relying on cars to get where they need to go and little motivation to walk."

Study Reveals Strong Voter Support for Public Transportation: Public transit ridership increased 3.2% in the first six months of 2006, according to a recent report released by the American Public Transportation Association. And it appears this increase in transit ridership may have a corresponding increase in the number of voters willing to pay for it.

A new report, released by the Center for Transportation Excellence (CFTE), provides an analysis of more than 200 local ballot measures related to transportation since 2000. According to the report, voters in 33 different states have approved 70% of all proposed transportation measures generating funding conservatively estimated in excess of $70 billion. These ballot measures, which include support for commuter and light rail, bus service, bike and pedestrian projects, and parking, have passed at twice the rate of all ballot measures.

The CFTE research, titled Transportation Finance at the Ballot Box: Voters Support Increased Investment, also details trends in voter-approved financing for transportation. More than 80 percent of all transportation ballot measures since 2000 have specifically authorized financing. The report found support across the board for a variety of funding tools, including sales taxes, property taxes, bonds, and dedicated fees.

This document provides case studies of successful projects and their structure, financing strategies, campaign language and ballot language that were used. It can be downloaded from www.cfte.org.

California leads the nation in raising local dollars for transportation projects. This November, there is another $40 billion in transportation measures on California ballots. The election results will indicate whether transportation is still a priority for the state’s voters.

What’s The Key to Getting the Development We Want? Builders continue to complain that the kind of walkable, community-oriented development touted by advocates of smart growth or new urbanism is not permissible under most city codes. According to Peter Katz, a man responsible in part for the writing of the Ahwahnee Principles, “a lot of communities are rewriting their general plans with high-minded goals of sustainability, walkability, etc., but they’re not rewriting their zoning ordinances."

The majority of codes forbid houses to locate near shops, and segregate different housing types from each other. This extreme separation of uses requires a car trip for every activity, and zoning and development codes that demand wide roads and large parking lots.

What is the key to getting the development we want? An increasing number of communities now think it’s the form-based code.

While traditional codes focus on isolating uses and controlling density, but say very little about how a community should feel, form-based codes do the opposite. As a first step, the community, through a planning exercise, decides what kind of place they want. Next the planners and architects present data that illustrates the kind of place that is envisioned, whether it’s a rural downtown, a mixed-use residential neighborhood, or a bustling city center.

California planner Paul Crawford wrote the state’s first form-based code for the town of Sonoma in 1999. He has since written 22 of them and the requests just keep coming in. The early adopters of the form-based code — Petaluma and Hercules — are looking good and the momentum to emulate this new zoning tool just keeps building.

Bill Fulton, an author, planner, and Councilmember for the City of Ventura, CA, was quoted in the real estate industry’s recent publication, On Common Ground. He observes, “In the next couple of years we’ll see dozens of form-based codes adopted. It may seem ironic that California, in many ways the motherland of automobile-oriented design, is blazing the trail in coding for mixed use districts.” But perhaps it is because California is ahead of other states in experiencing the unpleasant, if not disastrous, consequences of building according to the old standards.

Time to Sign Up!: On-line registration is now available for the February 2007 New Partners for Smart Growth Conference in Los Angeles. To register and get more program details, visit www.NewPartners.org.