Downtown Traffic: Problem or Opportunity?

According to Dan Zack, Downtown Development Coordinator for Redwood City, community residents there view downtown traffic congestion as a problem. In addressing this complaint, creative city staff have looked past the typical answers – that is making the street wider or putting in more parking lots – and have developed an innovative, far less costly solution.

City staff discovered that 30% of the cars on the busiest downtown street were occupied by people circling around looking for the perfect parking space. At the same time, there was plenty of parking available on side roads, within easy walking distance of the prime retail area.

Today in Redwood City there are just enough empty spaces on main street so that visitors can drive right in and park. This turn-around was accomplished by a combination of tweaking parking prices and eliminating all time restrictions.

Parking on Main Street now costs more. If visitors choose to park there and spend the day, that’s fine – but they will pay a heavy price for it. On the other hand, anyone willing to park and walk a short distance to his or her destination will pay less. Parking fees are carefully adjusted to achieve the desired effect.

This strategy has been successful both with shoppers and employees who once parked in prime locations, then moved their cars every hour or two to avoid a ticket.

To view a short, very entertaining video explaining the relationship between parking and traffic congestion, go to: http://www.streetsblog.org/2007/12/21/donald-shoup-plays-with-parking-fees-and-matchbox-cars/.

Unlike their colleagues in Redwood City, officials in the much larger city of Sacramento have determined that a measured dose of traffic congestion downtown might be a good thing. Sacramento transportation officials note that San Francisco, New York, and London, all cities with very healthy economies and dynamic cultures, have heavy traffic congestion. According to traffic planner Fedolia Harris, “If you want to be more than a cow town, go to any big metropolitan area, you don’t have cars moving at 40 miles per hour through the central city.”

It is current policy in Sacramento to try to keep city streets moving so that drivers reach speed limits between red lights, however a new proposal has been suggested for the general plan. It will reduce congestion standards in the central downtown business district from a Level C to a Level E, one step above F, for “failure” level.

This new way of thinking about traffic is a component of a downtown plan to encourage more tightly packed office and housing projects. The general plan, currently being updated, anticipates a tripling of the downtown population in the next 20 years, and 20,000 new jobs.

According to Councilmember Steve Cohn, the best bet is not to add extra lanes to thoroughfares but to give people options other than cars. This means making it easier for people to live and work downtown. It may also mean more bike lanes, exclusive lanes on some streets for buses, and the return of some old-fashioned downtown streetcars.

At the same time, the city is scrambling to cobble together enough parking without offering too much and resorting to block deadening and extremely expensive parking garages.

In conclusion, we offer a third, more controversial view put forth by former San Francisco Planning Director, Allen Jacobs. This noted author of the highly popular book, Great Streets, has advised, “Don’t worry about the parking, it will take care of itself.”

Opponents of Narrow Streets Are Beginning to Dwindle: The field of traffic engineering is slowly embracing narrow streets. This is evident from articles in professional magazines, downsized street standards in a growing number of communities, and recommended street designs from the Institute of Traffic Engineers and the Congress for the New Urbanism. In Sacramento, for instance, it is a traffic planner advocating for traffic congestion strategies that reduce dependence on the car instead of road widening.

However, regardless of the fact that narrow streets slow traffic and reduce accidents, create a comfortable place for pedestrians, cut the cost of development, make more land available for public and private spaces, reduce ambient air temperatures in hot summer climates, and reduce pollution caused by urban runoff — fire officials still stand in opposition.

According to a recent article in Planning Magazine, a typical medium-sized city has more than 500 miles of residential streets. Reducing street widths by five feet would save 300 acres of land. In addition to the open space that is lost to paving, the construction and maintenance of these excessively wide streets is costly.
The National Uniform Fire Code and International Fire Code specifies 20 feet of width, in addition to parking lanes, with very few exceptions. Even though these standards are advisory, state and local codes tend to follow suit. However, an increasing number of fire officials and developers are beginning to work together.

In places like Village Homes in Davis, CA; Baldwin Park in Orlando, FL; Canyon Rim Village in Redmond, OR; Peninsula Neighborhood in Iowa City, IA; and Glenwood Park in Atlanta, GA, fire officials and developers have come together to compromise. Usually, this begins with the developer asking the fire officials exactly what they need, then providing just enough space to accommodate the desired activities.

Compromises may include providing easements on either side of the street for the fire departments to run over if necessary, restricting parking on one or both sides of the streets or helping the fire department purchase smaller engines. Other design solutions include mountable curbs and load bearing sidewalks, sprinklers in all residential units, textured pavements and landscaped islands to visually narrow streets, or small gaps in on-street parking to accommodate the outriggers used to stabilize ladder trucks.

Progress made in this arena has been slow, but it is headed in the right direction. For more information, contact Steve Tracy at the LGC, stracy@lgc.org.

Americans In Tune With Smart Growth Policies: A recent poll sponsored by the National Association of Realtors and Smart Growth America revealed that Americans prefer to spend more on mass transit and highway maintenance and less on new roads.

Nearly half of those surveyed said public transit is the best way to reduce congestion. Only one in five said building new roads was the answer.

Asked about climate change, more than 70 percent of respondents expressed concern about how growth and development affects global warming. Nearly nine in 10 agreed that new communities should be built so that people can walk more and drive less; cars, homes and buildings should be required to be more energy efficient; and public transportation should be improved and made more available.

80% preferred developing older, existing urban and suburban areas rather than building new housing and commercial development at the edges of existing suburbs.

The Survey also revealed that people think their local governments could do a better job of planning. Only 29 percent say their community is doing an excellent or good job of handling growth, while the majority – 58% – believes their community is doing a fair or poor job.

Carried out in October of 2007, the survey was conducted by telephone among 1,000 adults living in the United States. The study has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points. For further information, go to www.REALTOR.org

Studies Continue to Link Health and Neighborhood Design: According to Dr. Kim Connolly, an Australian cardiologist, "The suburbs are a nightmare — a total planning disaster. People move in because they're affordable, and then they can't do anything. They're in the car all the time. You get this big house, but studies show that the rate of heart attack increases with the length of time you are stuck in traffic."

One of the most recent studies linking health and land use, Neighborhood Environments, and Resources for Healthy Living: a Focus on Diabetes in Toronto, by Ontario's Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences and St. Michael’s Hospital, points up a link between diabetes and neighborhoods where opportunities for physical activity are limited.

"Your neighborhood may be making you sick," says Dr. Gillian Booth, co-lead author of the study and an endocrinologist with St. Michael's. She notes that being overweight is a factor in diabetes as well as other diseases, including heart disease.

According to Dr. Booth, "Regularly walking briskly five times a week is a great health benefit. Living in an activity-friendly neighborhood, one where you can walk to different activities is now shown to be an advantage in avoiding disease. In some of the suburbs, there are no sidewalks, let alone any grocery stores or community centers or schools within walking distance. Often, access to public transportation is limited too."

In addition to limiting physical activity, our extreme auto dependence has additional health-related problems. A recent U.S. study, carried out by researchers at the Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California, found that children who lived within 500 meters of a freeway from the age of 10 had substantial deficits in lung function by the time they were 18.