Cities Empower Residents to Green Their Own Streets: In this time of budget shortages, officials in San Francisco, Portland, and Seattle are calming traffic on the cheap while, at the same time, helping to establish neighborhoods with a strong sense of community. How? They form partnerships with motivated neighborhood leaders and then get out of the way!

San Francisco: The Bay Area’s Metropolitan Transportation Commission gave a $75,000 grant to a resident who had secured signatures from her neighbors on a petition to calm traffic on one of the city’s busiest streets. She used the grant to model various options and employed a market researcher to interview neighbors about what they wanted. Based on the strong support of the entire neighborhood for her proposed changes, the SF Board of Supervisors voted to add bike lanes, narrow the road from 6 to 4 lanes, and put in a traffic light. The Department of Parking and Traffic took care of the installation.

But the neighbors weren’t finished. They wanted more green space. With no space for plants on the sidewalks, the residents tackled the medians. A crew of 126 people showed up to plant two blocks of medians with drought tolerant plants. At the second planting, 400 people came to help out, play music, and enjoy food donated by local restaurants. A guide has been developed to help other City residents plant their own medians — it can be found on the project’s website — www.sanjoseguerrero.com. The Mayor has appointed a “green czar” to assist the planting of 5,000 trees a year throughout the city. And perhaps best of all, once-isolated residents living on a busy street are now functioning as a strong neighborhood community.

Portland: In 1996, residents of one neighborhood undertook a mild form of civil disobedience, taking over a dangerous and unsightly intersection. The action was shut down but the Mayor and the City’s Department of Transportation decided that the project should be supported. This led to the adoption of an ordinance that allows and governs resident initiatives to transform intersections into public spaces — usually using paint — to turn large expanses of asphalt into colorful works of art! The activity continues under the leadership of a non-profit group found at www.cityrepair.org.

Seattle: The City of Seattle has a long tradition of working with neighborhood groups. Multiple neighborhood parks, tot lots, playfields, pocket parks, community gardens, streetscapes, traffic circles, greenbelts, salmon habitat and more have been built through public/nonprofit/resident partnerships. The improvements are initiated by people in the community who step forward with ideas and get together with neighbors and coworkers to get projects done. Financial assistance is provided by the City. For information, contact www.groundswellnw.org.

In all these efforts, neighborhood improvement is saving money and bringing together residents to develop a strong sense of community. This, in turn, leads to safer neighborhoods where residents watch out for one another.

A Shovel-Ready Sidewalk Extension, Minus the Shovel: In California, the City of San Jose’s Redevelopment Agency is trying out a new concept in downtown revitalization, a street reconfiguration that took only two weeks to install. It required no ear-jarring jackhammers, no digging up of underground utilities, little to no business disruption, and a minimal dollar investment.

The City posed urban planners, Ken Kay Associates, with the challenge: “Let’s create a public street environment that can become an inviting public space, and let’s do it all with modular, snap-together elements that are easy to install, adjust, relocate, and reuse.” The winning solution involved using rubber curbing, modular sidewalk extensions and precast planters that were all placed on top of the existing surfaces. The improvements are built to last but allow flexibility so the street/sidewalk configuration can adjust to changing needs or uses as the neighborhood evolves over time. The cost is a fraction of what the usual streetscape improvement project would be.
This report, among others, indicates the relevance of VMT to greenhouse gas emissions and indicates that we should accelerate our efforts to identify ways to reduce VMT growth in order to meet our climate goals. Further, studies continue to demonstrate that controlling greenhouse gases through improved land use planning also makes economic sense.

According to the Center for Clean Air Policy, households living in compact environments consume 20 percent less residential energy than comparable households living in sprawling environments.

In Atlanta, the Atlanta Station compact, mixed use, transit-oriented redevelopment project is predicted to generate $30 million per year in local tax revenue while reducing residents’ need to drive by more than 30 percent. Meanwhile, back in Portland, the Center for Transit Oriented Development reports that $73 million invested in the Portland Streetcar helped attract $2.3 billion in private investment within two blocks of the line.

The Sacramento Area Council of Governments projects GHG savings of 7.2 MMT CO2 by 2050, while saving $9 billion in infrastructure costs and $380 million in annual consumer fuel costs, yielding a net economic benefit of almost $200 per ton of CO2 saved.

Smart Growth and Health Care Costs: Columnist Neal Pierce lists the Smart Growth Benefits: “More fitness. America’s obesity epidemic curbed. Less gasoline burned. Fewer carbon emissions. Safer streets. Improved academic curbed. Less gasoline burned. Fewer transportation-related emissions. The carbon footprint for the family that moved to a car-dependent area was 40 percent higher, and transportation accounted for almost 85 percent of the difference.

California accounts for a major chunk of that medical bill, $42 billion in 2006, according to the California Center for Public Health Advocacy. A breakdown by California county can be found on the organization’s web page at www.publichealthadvocacy.org.

While California has one of the lower rates of adult obesity in the nation at 23.6 percent (nothing to be particularly proud of), we have the 28th highest number of overweight youths — 30.5% of our children, ages 10 to 17 are obese. This condition will condemn children to a lifetime risk of asthma, diabetes, cancer, heart disease, and more. The resulting health care cost is high; the cost in the quality of their lives is even higher.

Staff members Paul Zykofsky and Scott Clark were major contributors to a guidebook for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Leadership for Healthy Communities titled, Action Strategies Toolkit. It includes active living policies that do double duty, both for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and reducing obesity. It can be found at www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org.

New Local Government Resource Addresses GHG: The California Air Pollution Control Officers Association (CAPCOA) has released its second resource tool for local government to use in addressing greenhouse gas emissions. The first, CEQA and Climate Change, provides an excellent summary of options for local government in addressing greenhouse gases through CEQA.

The new document, Model Policies for Greenhouse Gases in General Plans offers background information, examples, references, links, and a systematic worksheet to help local governments in moving toward GHG considerations both in General Plan updates and in the development of specific Climate Action Plans. The effort involved many people, including local government planners. The document can be downloaded from www.capcoa.org.

Experts Tell Us, Climate Change Has Arrived: Climate change is already having visible effects in the United States, and the choices we make now will determine the severity of its effects in the future, according to a federal study released Tuesday assessing the current and anticipated domestic impacts of climate change. The report, Global Climate Change Impacts in the United States, was produced by experts from 13 U.S. government science agencies and universities. You can find a copy online at the U.S. Global Change Research Program website: www.globalchange.gov.

A New Day In Washington: The federal government’s interest in reducing auto dependence through land use that supports walking, biking, and transit seems to have grown from zero to one hundred in just a few short months.

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Add to this a quote from President Obama, “For too long, federal policy has actually encouraged sprawl and congestion and pollution, rather than quality public transportation and smart, sustainable development.”

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