Fresno, California Overcomes Resistance to Narrow Streets: There are many arguments in favor of reducing the width of city streets, particularly in residential areas and downtowns. In the City of Fresno, these arguments along with a field simulation were able to win support from the City’s fire department and solid waste department for a new, walkable development project featuring 32-foot wide streets with parking on both sides.

Research contracted by the LGC in the late 1990s demonstrated that in a hot summer climate, the temperature in a neighborhood with wide, unshaded streets can be ten degrees higher than in a similar neighborhood with narrow, tree-shaded streets. A lower ambient temperature can reduce or even eliminate the need for air conditioning.

Other studies show how wide streets encourage speeding and increase pedestrian fatalities. In the Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE) Journal in December 2002, a study titled "Low Speed Design Criteria for Residential Streets" demonstrated how residential streets wider than 32 feet tend to increase speeds of motorists by three to four miles per hour per foot of additional width, and influence motorists to drive 30 to 40 mph in residential areas—a speed that could prove fatal to pedestrians if hit by a car.

Experience has shown that many cities receive calls from residents in neighborhoods with wide streets requesting the installation of speed bumps to calm traffic. However, speed bumps are expensive, hard on fire trucks and increase emergency response time. A narrow street, on the other hand, will slow traffic and allow fire trucks to use their lights and sirens to travel down the center line as necessary to reach their destination quickly.

In addition to presenting the above information, department heads from the Fresno fire department and solid waste division were brought together to witness a field test determining just how much room their vehicles actually need. Results demonstrated that the vehicles could operate within smaller spaces than was expected, resulting in the fire department and solid waste division agreeing to support the narrower street widths.

While other communities have used similar techniques to reduce opposition to narrow streets, their efforts have not always succeeded. According to land use attorney Daniel Slone, California has a law allowing fire officials to set their own street width standards in planned unit developments, however, many fire officials “refuse to use it.” The Fresno experience seems to indicate the tide may be turning. The full story can be found in the fall issue of the American Institute of Certified Planners’ journal at: www.planning.org/practicingplanner/default.htm.

The ITE has just issued a new document, The Road Diet Handbook: Setting Trends for Livable Streets. It makes the case for narrowing existing streets and is a highly credible source that could be a useful tool toward gaining support for narrower streets. The Road Diet Handbook takes a practitioner through planning, analysis, design, and implementation of projects that reduce street width, and assesses the livability benefits gathered from case studies around the world including data showing that narrower streets can improve mobility for all modes of transportation. For a copy, google the ITE’s online bookstore and request The Road Diet Handbook.

Largest Known Application of a Form-Based Code Makes History: After four years of political wrangling, hundreds of public and internal meetings, several revisions, and hard work from a determined planning department, consultant team and Mayor, the City of Miami made urban planning history this month by adopting the largest known application of a form-based code. In doing so, Miami has catapulted itself to the forefront of large American cities committed to implementing smart growth principles.

Miami’s record may not last long. The City of Denver, with a population exceeding Miami by about a third, looks likely to adopt its own comprehensive form-based code in several months. However, it is not only the large cities that are updating their zoning codes to transform their communities. On the same night as the Miami city council approved a new code by a vote of 4 to 1, the small town of Jamestown, Rhode Island (population 5,600) adopted its own form-based code.
A Green Codes Task Force: To integrate green building into the New York City construction and energy code, Mayor Bloomberg and City Council Speaker Quinn asked the New York Chapter of the US Green Building Council to assemble a Green Codes Task Force to provide a comprehensive review of the City’s codes. The Task Force, launched last year, will issue recommendations to eliminate barriers to green construction in the City’s building codes and identify opportunities to further green development, taking into account the unique construction environment the nation now faces.

In California, developers that have attempted to undertake more cutting edge, sustainable projects have also consistently faced multiple barriers inherent in local building and zoning codes. Seventy-eight million dollars in competitive grants are expected to be available next year from the CA Strategic Growth Council for cities and counties to update their codes to make them consistent with the goals of California’s climate change legislation, AB 32 and SB 375. Now might be an opportune time for cities and counties to begin analyzing how their codes might be changed to support and encourage more climate-friendly alternatives to business-as-usual land use practices.

Transit’s Role in Controlling GHG Emissions:
The estimates are accumulating and indicate that transit has a major role to play in reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

From Smart Growth America: In 30 years, a 10% annual growth in transit ridership would save more than 80 billion gallons of gasoline per year, more than three-quarters of the oil that America consumes currently for transportation. Also, carbon dioxide emissions would be cut by more than 700 million tons per year, or 12% of current total U.S. emissions.

From Elana Schor at Streetsblog Capitol Hill: Increasing transit ridership by 10% annually would reduce CO2 emissions by 180 million tons of each year. This would get us halfway to the target set in the current House climate bill within three years. The climate bill passed by the House in June aims to reduce emissions by 17% below 2005 levels over the next 11 years, making a national transit ridership target a key weapon in the arsenal of climate policy-makers.

But if you build transit, will they come? It turns out that in some cases, cities don’t even have to expand the current transit system to experience an increase in ridership.

Five years ago, voters in the 31 communities in the Denver metro area committed $4.7 billion in sales tax funding for its FasTracks initiative. It turns out not one of the 119 miles of promised light rail has been built because of material and land acquisition cost increases, a poor economy and other complications. However, Denver has so far succeeded despite the snafus through citywide strategies for supporting public transit, walking and biking as the modes for addressing freeway and city arterial congestion.

The City has almost doubled its public transit ridership since FasTracks was passed in 2004. In 2004, about five percent of city commuters used public transit; that figure hit nine percent in 2008 as reported by the US Census Bureau’s American Community Survey.

Transit – How Do We Pay For It? Former LGC Boardmembers, CA State Senator Loni Hancock and US Senator Barbara Boxer, are highly dedicated to helping our communities expand transit options and both are making progress.

Senator Hancock succeeded in passing SB 83 this session, now signed into law by Governor Schwarzenegger. The bill authorizes countywide transportation planning agencies to impose an annual fee of up to $10 on motor vehicles registered within the county. The measure must receive approval by a simple majority of the voters and the funds must be spent on measures that reduce traffic congestion including public transit service expansions. Pedestrian and bicycle facilities also qualify for use of these funds.

Senator Boxer, Chair of the Senate Environment Committee, has succeeded in setting aside an average of 2.4% of revenues generated by the Clean Energy Jobs and American Power Act every year to help states and municipalities reduce emissions. Half of the money would be used to support the expansion of public transit, the other half would support grants for transportation and smart growth planning. This doubles the amount dedicated to these purposes by the House version of the bill.

Calculator Estimates the Carbon Reduction Potential of Planting Trees: Over the course of its life, a tree can store 10,000 pounds of carbon dioxide. In hotter climates the greenhouse gas benefits from energy conservation realized by a strategically placed tree can exceed even those of carbon storage by reducing ambient air temperatures. To help communities calculate the climate benefits of trees, the Center for Urban Forest Research now has a Tree Carbon Calculator (CTCC) that covers 16 US climate zones. Users can enter species, tree size (diameter-at-breast-height) or tree age and receive information on the amount of biomass and carbon stored in the tree as well as other greenhouse gas reduction benefits. To learn more or download this application, visit the U.S. Forest Service Climate Change Resource Center website: http://www.fs.fed.us/ccrc/topics/urban-forests/.

Livable Places Update is published monthly and is a project of the Local Government Commission’s Center for Livable Communities. For subscription information call us at ☎ (916) 448-1198. If you have news from your area to include in future issues, please send it to: LPU, 1303 J Street, Suite 250, Sacramento, CA