It's Time To Think About Twofers: About $78 million in grants and loans for general plans, specific plans, and zoning codes will be allocated by the Strategic Growth Council next year. The Energy Commission has another $10 million to contribute to the pot.

Inside sources say that preference will be given to applicants that are looking to use the money to achieve more than one benefit: Twofers, threefers, and fourfers are in vogue!

Green Streets As Twofers: The concept of “Green Streets” is taking off across the nation. The goal is to both support walking as a form of transportation and reduce urban runoff — the primary source of water pollution.

The City of St. Louis recently completed a green street that reduces four traffic lanes to three, changes traffic light timing, adds curb bulbouts to reduce the time it takes pedestrians to cross the street, and increases lighting and landscaping. About $2.7 million in federal stimulus funds were awarded for the work.

According to city staff, the goal was to have 50% of the new sections be porous surfacing or plantings so that the majority of rainfall will percolate into the ground. St. Louis has a combined sewage-stormwater system, which can be overwhelmed during downpours, creating a serious pollution problem. Green streets are a solution.

Not to be outdone, in September the City of Sacramento opened what they say is one of the nation's longest “Green Streets.” The five-block long project, located in a previously declining neighborhood, now provides pedestrians with a safer and more pleasant walk to the Swanston Light Rail Station while at the same time capturing drainage water.

Cities Looking Beyond Twofers To a More Comprehensive Approach: Some officials are moving beyond retrofitting a single road or building and are looking at what might be done to an entire neighborhood or district to create green jobs, catalyze renewable energy development, save water, encourage smart growth, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

A measure proposed in the Washington State legislature would authorize cities to create neighborhood-sized “Climate Benefit Districts” that would work something like an Enterprise Zone to concentrate public investment. This would foster an integrated approach to green-house gas reduction measures in a defined neighborhood or district and include smart growth, green buildings, locally-grown food, and affordable housing.

A similar concept in Portland, OR called the “Eco-District” is close to becoming a reality. A proposal for the Portland State University campus involves coordinating rainwater reuse strategies, so that runoff from one building can be reused in a neighboring structure. For instance, runoff generated by a large classroom and administrative building may be reused as a greywater supply to toilets in a dormitory.

At the Lloyd Crossing neighborhood, a residential and business corridor across the Willamette River from downtown Portland, a district heating project is being considered where centralized heating plants will pipe hot water via underground pipes to multiple buildings. Community-based thermal systems, which are ubiquitous in Scandinavia, eliminate the need to install — and pay for — chillers and boilers in individual buildings. According to the International District Energy Association, they also are about 20% more efficient than conventional approaches, and transition easily to renewable fuels such as biomass.
In China, an “Eco Block” prototype is planned for the city of Qingdao. The design includes multiple residential towers and townhouses and calls for reusing all of the community’s water, recycling 80% of its waste and reducing energy demand by 40%.

Of course, all of these projects depend on good business models to get off the ground. As the Portland planning process moves forward, the city is looking at creating incentives for developers who sign on to an “eco-district.” Project consultants think that developers of eco-districts will gain market advantage because people will want to live in green neighborhoods where the quality of life is higher and the cost of living is reduced.

Update Your General Plan On The Cheap: A key author of the Ahwahnee Principles, Andres Duany, was in Sacramento for several days this month meeting with state officials and LGC members from the Sacramento region. He and the local developers who accompanied him were asked about where best to spend state dollars to encourage sustainable development. They all agreed — outdated zoning codes create the single biggest barrier to better development.

The group recommended against spending large sums of consultant dollars to rewrite general plans, stating that all it will take to update most general plans is a few weeks to the language. They all agreed that the most important place for the State to invest precious grant money will be in the updating of zoning codes. Currently, most zoning codes make smart growth illegal. New codes are needed that will allow developers to develop and redevelop smart growth neighborhoods without having to continually seek a variance.

Fortunately, the California Air Pollution Control Officers Association (CAPCOA) has come to the rescue. This past June, CAPCOA completed an excellent, on-line resource titled Model Policies for Greenhouse Gases In General Plans. These professionals suggest that the following language be included in the land use element of a general plan: “Promote land use strategies that decrease reliance on automobile use, increase the use of alternative modes of transportation, maximize efficiency of urban services provision and reduce emissions of GHGs.”

The document then provides a suite of objectives and implementation policies. Local officials can select those that best fit the needs of their own community.

In addition to the land use section, the document provides goals and objectives under the categories of transportation, energy efficiency, alternative energy, municipal operations, waste reduction and diversion, conservation and open space, and education.

To download a copy, go to www.capcoa.org and click on the green box on the left titled, Model Policies for Greenhouse Gas in General Plans.

A new comprehensive analysis titled, Moving Cooler, has confirmed that the single most effective way to reduce California’s largest source of greenhouse gasses — personal auto use — is not a single approach at all. Expected public transit strategies coordinated with combining travel activity, land use development, and operational efficiencies can reduce greenhouse gases (GHG) by 24%, according to the study. The report estimates that the annual savings in vehicle costs to consumers exceed the cost of enacting these strategies by as much as $112 billion.

The Moving Cooler report was sponsored by an extraordinarily comprehensive group of transportation-related entities including a sizeable chunk of federal agencies with different priorities, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, the Federal Highway Administration, and the Federal Transit Administration. Others include Shell Oil, the Urban Land Institute, the American Public Transportation Association, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and many private foundations.

“This study confirms that to be effective in reducing greenhouse gas emissions from the transportation sector, we must move beyond thinking about individual modes,” said William Millar, president of the American Public Transportation Association. The study shows that from 1996 to 2006, growth in U.S. transportation GHG emissions represented almost one-half (47%) of the increase in total U.S. GHG emissions. The research points out that the U.S. cannot reach its emission reduction goals without successful strategies to reduce GHG emissions from transportation.

Some specific near term strategies to reduce GHG emissions include expanded public transit services, driving at lower speeds, and other driving techniques, congestion pricing, and operational improvements, according to the study.

Long term strategies that need to begin today include changes in development patterns and land use that create mixed use, compact development and reduce vehicle travel. The authors of the study note that these long term strategies are just as essential as the short term ones. According to Millar, “This report confirms that focusing on creating livable communities is the right decision and with these specific proposed actions, we will make a difference.”

The executive summary of Moving Cooler, a fact sheet and other information is available at http://www.movingcooler.info/.