Focusing On What’s Already There: Since the close of World War II, the amount of land devoted to living and shopping in this nation has more than doubled on a per capita basis. Homes, offices, retail, and services — many of which were concentrated in cities and towns — have been spreading out more each year. Every development is further from the town center than the last and surrounded by even more paved parking, wider streets, and more big-box retail. This has left holes in the pedestrian infrastructure of our communities that make them impossible to navigate on foot or by transit.

But the game has changed. The many empty spaces that now exist in the urban fabric suggest a new land use planning strategy: California’s state planning goals currently reflect what many local governments have already concluded. Smart growth is in — sprawl is out!

The State Government Code lists promoting infill development and investing in existing communities as a land use priority. Another, complementary new law (AB 32) dictates that land use planning be done in such a way as to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This measure continues to be enforced by the Office of the Attorney General as he reviews and comments on how well proposed city and country general plans support walking, biking and transit.

Consumer demand is consistent with the State government’s emphasis on smart growth and walkable communities. A study published in August by CEOs for Cities revealed that sales prices are higher for homes located in pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods, and command a premium of as much as $30,000 per dwelling in some cities. Chicago, Sacramento and San Francisco were among those included in the survey.

In Sacramento, for instance, walkable neighborhoods near downtown, built in the late thirties and early forties are now some of the most highly prized places to live. The midtown area’s lofts, condos and homes are also very popular, particularly with twenty and thirty somethings and others who prize an urban lifestyle and the ability to walk to work, stores, restaurants, and the theater.

The public’s embrace of smart growth and walkable communities influenced the adoption by the California legislature of Senate Bill 375, signed into law last year. The bill, authored by Sacramento Democrat Sen. Darrell Steinberg, is designed to help cut greenhouse gas emissions through anti-sprawl measures, including rewarding new residential development with easy access to public transit.

Cities and Towns Demonstrate How To Fill In The Blanks: While sprawl development has left our communities looking like swiss cheese, some local governments are showing that holes in the urban fabric can be filled to create more livable places to live.

In a few communities, including Sacramento County, old strip retail corridors are now being examined as locations for new urban villages. Others, like San Francisco, have already created new neighborhoods on old industrial sites. In San Jose, an expansive office campus is slated to be filled in with housing, retail and parks.

Transit stops shout out for housing to come and join them! The City of Pasadena is among those that have responded to the call, building a transit-oriented development on a Metro Rail that connects Los Angeles and Old Town Pasadena. Del Mar station serves as a lovely gateway to the City and features 347 new housing units and 20,000 square feet of retail, built in the Old Pasadena style of architecture.

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An increasing number of the cities, from those in major metropolitan areas to the smallest towns have been working to fill in the empty spaces in their downtowns, adding housing and entertainment, and creating safe, lively places for people to live, work and play.

These projects do not happen by accident, Forward thinking and better planning are imperative. Specific plans and form based codes must be prepared to define a community-supported vision and zoning changes must make it easy for a developer to step in and do what the community wants. Sadly, most zoning codes currently make walkable development illegal.

State Looks to Fund Better Planning: In large part because of SB 375, everyone from state officials to environmental organizations are beginning to recognize the need to help cities and counties fund the proactive planning required to make walkable projects happen.
Most importantly, the State is considering the investment of cap and trade dollars in zoning code reform and transit. The logic of spending cap and trade money on land use is bolstered by research, including a recent study by the nonprofit group, Transform. The organization projected that California residents living in walkable, transit-friendly communities, with good access to jobs and shopping sites, would spend nearly $31 billion less per year on car purchases and related costs. The report adds, this would result in a 27% reduction in greenhouse gases.

Similarly, the study estimated annual savings for the Los Angeles area at $15.4 billion plus a 38% cut in greenhouse gases; in the Bay Area, $10.7 billion savings plus a 42% cut in greenhouse gases; and in San Diego, $2.8 billion savings plus a 30% cut in gases. Similarly, a study by the Urban Land Institute estimates that San Franciscos residents spend on average of $500 less each month than suburban dwellers in the area.

The Economic and Allocation Advisory Committee set up by CalEPA to advise on the State’s future cap and trade program, has recommended that at least 25% of cap and trade revenues be invested in environmental programs. Transit and land use zoning changes have been singled-out as particularly good targets for investment! (Thanks to many of our LGC members for playing a significant role in promoting this concept.)

More sources of funding for zoning reform are coming forth from the CA State Strategic Growth Council, established by the legislature last year. The Council is charged with working across agencies to, among other things, assist local entities in the planning of sustainable communities and meeting AB 32 goals.

The Council is currently writing three RFPs that direct Prop 85 funds to local governments for better planning. They include grants for planning for urban greening ($17.5 million), implementing urban greening projects ($70 million) and about $65 million directed to urban planning. The LGC has been working with the Strategic Growth Council to assure that the planning funds can be spent on specific plans and form-based codes that improve walkability and transit access. The RFPs for these projects as likely to be available by February 22 and the responses due by April 22, 2010. To access the draft RFPs and monitor their availability, go to www.sgc.ca.gov.

Another $10 million from ARRA block grant money has been allocated to planning by the CA Energy Commission. The RFP for the expenditure of these funds has not been made available as yet. As of this writing, it appears that the funds will be passed on to the regional planning agencies to administer.

More financial incentives for better planning are likely to be granted by newly amended California Transportation Commission guidelines that will favor transportation funding investments that significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions as compared to business as usual.

**The Federal Government Follows Suit:** DOT Secretary Ramond LaHood recently announced that his agency would begin using livability-based funding guidelines for major transit projects. This represents a dramatic change in policy from the previous guidelines that emphasize cost and time saved.

According to Secretary LaHood, “We want to base our decisions on how much transit helps the environment, how much it improves development opportunities and how it makes communities better places to live.”

The change will apply to the procedures that the Federal Transit Administration employs to evaluate major transit projects. In making funding decisions, the FTA will now evaluate the environmental, community and economic development benefits provided by transit projects in addition to congestion relief benefits.

**What To Look For in a Zoning Code:** There was a time in many of our cities and towns when streets were shared by cars, streetcars, bicyclists and pedestrians. Buildings contained apartments and retail space and neighborhoods had amenities, including grocery stores, within easy walking distance.

Today, however, many zoning codes make it illegal to site a grocery store in a residential neighborhood or construct a building that contains housing and retail all in one. Fire departments insist on very wide streets, parking standards require the construction of massive parking lots, and in many other ways our communities continue to be governed by zoning laws that accommodate the car rather than people.

Obviously, outdated zoning codes need to be identified and rewritten so that we can bring back the neighborhoods where one can carry out many daily activities on foot or transit. Experts say some of the top factors that make a community walkable are street trees, low volumes of auto traffic, sidewalks, narrow streets, interconnected streets and paths, on-street parking rather than parking lots, reduced traffic speeds, mixed land-use, buildings fronted to areas used by pedestrians (eyes on the street), and small block size.

The City of Decatur, GA has completed a thorough analysis of the City’s zoning code to determine the changes that are needed to make the community serve the pedestrian over the car. According to planning director Amanda Thompson, university students have successfully carried out the task, picking out the offending codes.

This year, the city will kick off an update of their 2000 Strategic Plan with a community-wide visioning effort. With a city already informed and supportive of walkability, it is likely that the vision will include a more walkable community. New zoning codes to update those identified as out-of-date will follow. For more information, email Decatur’s Planning Director at amanda.thompson@decaturga.com or view the City’s web page at http://www.decaturga.com.