Livable Places **Update**

Emerging Trends in Community Planning and Design

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When Preparing A Sustainable Community Strategy, Consider This: SB 375 is the new law that requires regional planning agencies to prepare Sustainable Communities Strategies — plans that reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT) to targets set by the CA Air Resources Board. These strategies are to be the basis for regional transportation plans submitted to the U.S. DOT for transportation funding.

Local officials know that preparing a plan that will reduce VMT can be challenging. There is a lot of demand from community residents for increasing freeway capacity to reduce inefficient and irritating traffic congestion. However, at least a decade ago, it was observed that expanding a freeway only leads to more people driving. It is generally agreed that an improvement in traffic congestion lasts only about five years after completion of a new freeway. After that, the road is likely to become even more congested with motorists.

The results of past studies of U.S. highway improvements were confirmed recently by new studies carried out by University of Toronto economist Matthew Turner. His research results, recently aired by NPR, found that nothing has changed — building more traffic lanes attracts more traffic! His equation is simple — increasing the number of highways in a city by 1% causes driving to increase by 1%.

Turner also found that providing more transit can lure more motorists out of their cars. However it doesn't do much for traffic congestion, as former motorists are just replaced by new ones.

Ultimately, Turner believes that the only way to deal with congestion is to follow the lead of cities like London, Singapore and Stockholm, which have adopted "congestion pricing" — tolls on people driving in the center city. Turner says Stockholm, specifically, has seen a 50% reduction in travel time at peak times because of tolls.

One can reach another conclusion from these studies — traffic congestion itself limits VMT. During the boom years of the Silicon Valley, traffic congestion in the Bay Area became intolerable. During that time, there was a significant and observable increase in transit ridership — on all modes including the ferries and BART.

Other strategies for reducing traffic congestion include designing neighborhoods so that people can more readily walk or bike to their destinations, and taking greater advantage of internet advancements that enhance telecommuting.

Consider the New Housing Market When Responding to SB 375: In addition to requiring a reduction in VMT, SB 375 also sets forth new procedures for updating housing elements. But when updating a housing element, it is important to note that the housing market is changing.

SB 375 changes State Housing Element law in several ways. Regional planning efforts for transportation and housing are now linked and must be updated once every eight years. (There's a penalty for jurisdictions that don't meet the Housing Element schedule: They must prepare Housing Elements every four years instead.)

The law also strengthens the language on required re-zonings: Local jurisdictions must rezone property to be consistent with the Housing Element within three years of the date the Element is adopted, and minimum density and development standards for the site must be included. Most important, perhaps, is the requirement that Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) numbers must conform to the SB 375-mandated Sustainable Communities Strategies now under preparation by regional planning agencies.

At the same time that the RHNA law has changed, the housing needs of California's residents have taken a dramatic turn — largely due to new financial and demographic conditions. Neighborhoods dominated by homogeneous, single family homes are experiencing high levels of foreclosures. Pulte Homes, one of the nation's largest builders of this housing product, has reported losses of more than a billion dollars for 2010.

Arthur Nelson, a past speaker at the LGC's New Partners for Smart Growth Conference, has warned us that this would happen — predicting early on that the U.S. would face a massive oversupply of large-lot single family houses. Given this circumstance, he advises against zoning for any more of that single-family housing type.

At the same time, Nelson predicts an undersupply of multifamily housing. His conclusion is based on research revealing that 90% of demand for new housing will be households without children, and 47% will be senior citizens. People in both of these age groups have shown a preference for multifamily units over large-lot sprawl.

When those 65 and older move, 80% vacate single-family houses, but only 41% move into another single-family unit. The rest — 59% — move into multifamily buildings

for a variety of reasons, including reducing maintenance requirements and the ability to get around without a car.

Multi-family housing located in downtown San Diego encourages walking and biking to destinations.

People in their twenties and early thirties are unable to afford a large-lot single family home; however, many say they wouldn't want one anyway. Raised in the suburbs, this group tends to prefer the excitement of higher activity, multi-use neighborhoods and downtowns.

Another important factor reducing the demand for single-family homes is the fact that household size is increasing. For economic reasons, kids are not leaving home and elders in need of care are moving in with their relatives. As a result of these multiple forces, Nelson estimates that, nation-wide, we now have an excess supply of 5 million large lot, single-family homes.

At the same time, the need for rental units is predicted to increase. More stringent rules for mortgages, proposed last March, will likely include a 20% down payment requirement. Home ownership will be out of reach for many.

What does this mean for local government housing elements? Nelson suggests that cities consider rezoning McMansions so that they can meet the increased need for multi-family housing — allowing basements, for example, to be retrofitted with a kitchen to create an apartment. Cities might also want to make it easier to add grandmother units to existing homes. R-1 zoning should be re-evaluated, and possibly changed to provide for more mixed-use, multi-family neighborhoods.

Finally, new housing preferences point to the need to work regionally so that communities that want to improve downtown economic vitality by building multi-story housing can take the pressure off communities that prefer not to grow. To reach SB 375-VMT reduction targets, cities may want to do what the Association of Bay Area Governments has recently done – cut a deal among local government to provide more housing in areas with good transit access and rearrange the RHNA numbers to be consistent with this goal. Today, this strategy makes more sense than ever before.

Studies Show Transit-Oriented Developments Need Less Parking: We know from studies by UC Berkeley Professor Robert Cervero and others that people who live in transit-oriented development in urban centers of the San Francisco Bay Area have fewer cars and therefore require less parking. We did not know, however, whether this same pattern would be repeated in more spread out, suburban areas.

Parking requires a lot of space that could be better used for other purposes. According to a UC Berkeley study in 2008, decreasing parking ratios from 2.2 to 1.1 space per acre will increase the number of units that can be built by 20 to 33%.

Reducing parking ratios also lowers construction costs. Building covered parking often costs more than $30,000 per space. An uncovered parking lot costs about $5,000 per space.

Neighborhoods dominated by parking lots are less attractive, less safe, less pedestrian-friendly, and have a higher ambient temperature on hot summer days.

Thankfully, a recent study by San Jose State University is now telling us that residents living near rail transit in the more suburban Santa Clara County also have fewer automobiles per household. In fact, the study of 12 housing developments near the Valley Transit Authority trains revealed that over 26% — well over 9,000 parking spaces — were empty at the time of the study.

Currently, required residential parking in Santa Clara County municipalities ranges from less than 1.3 parking spaces per dwelling to 2.5 spaces per unit. However, on average, only 1.3 spaces are needed according to the survey. Basically, the research showed that cities are requiring too much parking for housing located within a half mile or less of a transit stop. Although they only studied parking at housing near rail transit, the researchers predict that the same results would likely occur near Bus Rapid Transit stops.

The California Infill Builders Association has been focused on the need for reducing parking restrictions on the basis that doing so will make more multi-family units "pencil out," A bill addressing this issue has been moving through the legislative process on unanimous votes. It has one more stop – to the Senate Floor, and will then move on to the Governor. AB 710 by Assemblymember Nancy Skinner would prohibit a city or county from requiring a minimum parking standard greater than one parking space per 1,000 square feet of nonresidential improvements and one parking space per unit of residential improvement for any new development project in a transit intensive area. There are provisions for cities to opt out, when certain requirements are met.

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