Livable Places **Update**

Emerging Trends in Community Planning and Design

June 2011 www.lgc.org

The Car and the Pedestrian – Are Cities Playing Favorites? It seems like only yesterday we all loved cars best. However, many came to realize that prioritizing cars over people — parking lots over public plazas — was contributing to the decline of town and city centers. When, in the early nineties, LGC members tried to reverse this trend, we ran headlong into policies prohibiting anything that would slow the cars and trucks roaring through the center of town — trees, flowers, banners, road diets, traffic circles — all were considered unacceptable by transportation professionals.

Former Santa Barbara Mayor Gil Garcia, our LGC Chair at the time, met with the Director of Caltrans to explain how the cars and trucks-first policy on state highways that also serve as main streets was impeding downtown economic development. Shortly thereafter, Caltrans began work on a new document titled *Main Streets: Flexibility in Planning, Design and Operations*, that provides new design guidelines for highways that run through city centers.

Also about sixteen years ago, the LGC started bringing consultant Dan Burden — often called the "Johnny Appleseed" of walkable communities — to cities and counties throughout California, helping them redesign streets to give equal priority to all users. Many California cities have now benefited from Dan's expertise.

Redondo Beach Embraces Both Modes: The *Washington Post* recently described Burden's work in Redondo Beach where the city is narrowing a 4-lane, nearly mile-long boulevard to two lanes, putting in diagonal parking and landscaping in the middle of the street and widening the sidewalks to add trees and outdoor dining areas.

Cars that once sped along the boulevard at 40-50 mph now slow down to 15-20 mph, making it safer for people to cross streets and patronize the 30 new businesses that have moved downtown. What was formerly a ghost town is now a community destination.

Redondo Beach city planning director Brian Ludicke was quoted as saying that "While these things benefit people who want to bike and walk, it has a lot of benefits for the community beyond that... It does a lot for public health, it does a lot for the aesthetic value of the community, it creates a better place to live, and it increases property value."

European Cities Reject the Car: A *New York Times* article recently pointed out that U.S. cities are still trying to accommodate the car, synchronizing green lights and offering apps that help drivers find parking places. This is in contrast to many European cities that today are downright hostile to the car. Popular cities like Munich, Vienna, and Copenhagen have closed streets to car traffic, dramatically increasing the number of bicycles and pedestrians in the process. London and Stockholm are charging hefty fees to cars that enter the heart of the city.

Over the past two years, many German cities have joined a national network of "environmental zones" where only favored cars with low carbon emissions can enter. In these communities, parking spaces are severely limited, including around shopping malls and apartment houses.

In Zurich, Switzerland, city officials have completely lost all love for the automobile — it's a painful time for the lonely car there! Pedestrian undercrossings have been removed and those on foot now take priority on the street. Closely spaced traffic lights have been added on roads into town, with more time devoted to red than green. This is causing congestion and delays for cars, leading even more people to reject the car as a transportation option.

The city's chief traffic planner reports frustration when he visits cities where cars are still favored, "I can't get used to the idea that I am worth less than a car."

Study Shows Economic Advantage of Favoring the Pedestrian: The University of Massachusetts this month released a research document titled, *Pedestrian and Bicycle Infrastructure: A National Study of Employment Impacts*. They found that for every million dollars spent, pedestrian projects average 10 jobs while auto-centric "road-only" projects generate only 7.8 jobs. Providing for bicycles accomplishes even more — 11.44 local jobs per one million invested.

The study didn't take into account the economic benefit that occurs when residents are spending less money on gasoline. When people drive less, it leaves more money in their pockets to circulate in the local economy. Portlanders have calculated that by reducing auto use in their region by 4 fewer miles a day, an additional $2.6 billion a year is circulating in the local economy to support local businesses

Of course, the design of the neighborhood has the ability to dictate how much people must spend on gasoline. The most recent study has revealed that households in regions around Portland with no mixed-use or good transit, drive their cars an average of 21.8 miles a day. Those in neighborhoods with good transit and a mix of uses drive only 9.8 miles every day. Adding this up, it means 55% less automobile use in mixed-use, transit-served neighborhoods than in sprawling subdivisions.

There are even more economic benefits to walkable, bicycle-friendly communities — those gained through reduced health care costs. Research shows that people walk and bike more frequently in neighborhoods that provide these options. Physicians know that lack of physical activity leads to obesity. Today the medical costs for people who are obese average $1,400 a year more than they do for people who maintain a healthy weight.

News Alert: A new argument for making our cities more walkable has appeared this month! A report from *Science Daily* indicates that couples that commute long-distance run a 40% higher risk of separating than those who live more fuel-efficient life styles!

Cities Become Climate Ready By Building on Existing Strengths: Many regions, cities and towns are looking to their own unique, natural and man-made resources to set achievable goals for reducing greenhouse gases and adapting to climate change.

San Diego is taking advantage of its great climate and abundant sun with a strategy that includes adding 50 megawatts of renewable energy by 2013 (much of it is new solar capacity). An equally ambitious target to reduce energy use through energy efficiency and demand-side management complements this goal. The City is also taking advantage of the existing transit system, with plans to develop the full potential of their 3-line, 82 kilometer light rail trolley system. The trolley is already accommodating 90,000 passenger trips a day.

Of course, the success of transit depends upon the land uses that surround it. San Diego completed an update of its general plan in 2008 and subsequently won the American Planning Association's Burnham Award for excellence in a comprehensive plan. The plan is built around the concept of a "City of Villages" where future development is concentrated around transit, in mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented nodes located near job centers. The plan envisions neighborhoods that are both livable and energy efficient.

San Jose is building on their own, unique advantage as an epicenter of green businesses. In 2007, the city council approved a Green Vision which seeks to "transform San Jose into the world center of Clean Technology innovation"—demonstrating that "the goals of economic growth, environmental stewardship and fiscal responsibility are inextricably linked." Other targets established for 2020 are a reduction in per capita energy use, renewable energy generation, solid waste reduction, alternative fuel vehicles, new trees, smart streetlights and the construction of trails.

San Jose not only set high goals, they adopted the bold and exemplary policy of measuring their progress! After only 4 years, the solid waste reduction program has already achieved 74% of the 2020 reduction goals and the city has completed more than half of the trail-miles that were set forth in the plan. Their purchase of alternative fuel vehicles is almost halfway completed. In terms of clean, high tech jobs, they are on track for reaching their 2020 goals, with an increase of 17% over the past four years. Other categories are lagging behind. One of the efforts that has proven most challenging is a program to convince residents to reduce their energy use.

Denver's FasTracks transit system is expanding to accommodate a projected 37% increase in green jobs by 2030.
Photo courtesy of FasTracks RTD of Denver

Denver and San Francisco are also often acknowledged for being ahead in the race to be green. According to a city press release, Denver's FasTracks, "is the most ambitious transit initiative in U.S. history, with the construction of 119 miles of new light rail" within just a few years. Along with strong sustainability objectives, Denver is projecting a 37% increase in green jobs by 2030, demonstrating their strong belief that the low carbon economy is alive and well.

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