Livable Places **Update**

Emerging Trends in Community Planning and Design

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Could Land Use/Transportation Decisions Be Digging Us Into A Fiscal Hole? The transportation infrastructure in California is not so good, according to award-winning transportation planning and traffic engineer Ron Milam, a Principal with Fehr and Peers. Milam delivered this unsettling news at an LGC June dinner forum for local elected officials from the Sacramento region.

Milam's job often requires that he analyze a proposed land use element for a general plan, then prepare a transportation plan sized to serve it in a way that is consistent with the jurisdiction's Level of Service (LOS) standards. However Milam says he is rarely ever asked about the related costs of the plan he has created - "it's generally accepted practice not to check the math." However, if he were asked the math question, he says most of the time he would have to respond, "You can't afford it - not the new construction costs nor the operation and maintenance."

Milam noted that in California, 70% of the state's roads need to be repaired or replaced. The price tag will be about $82 billion over the next twenty years. Unfortunately, this is $18 billion more than the amount of money that is expected to be available for road repair. At the same time, while our roads deteriorate, Californians are spending the majority of our available cash on road expansion.

"So", many might respond, "we can handle a few bumpy roads. What's the problem with that?" The problem is that repairs made in the early states of deterioration don't cost much to repair. But as they grow older, roads deteriorate at an increasing rate to the point that when they begin to look like alligator skin, they must be completely replaced. Add to that the problems that broken down roads create for those who want to walk or ride a bike.

Milam advises that costs be factored in during the process of designing a transportation plan. Don't construct a transportation plan that the community cannot afford to maintain - doing so will dig the community into a financial hole.

He points out that standards like vehicle level of service often dictate the size of a road. The cost of that standard needs to be factored in when level of service policy is set.

Second, he suggests looking more carefully at the cost of the circulation element of the land use plan. There is a 30-44% reduction in trips from mixed-use, transit-oriented development and a 38% potential reduction in upfront infrastructure costs if the community decides to move toward a smart growth model.

LGC staff suggest that when a street is dug up, make sure to address all the issues at once before paving it over again. Does it make sense to add bike and/or pedestrian paths? Should built-in parklets be added, such as the ones that make the City of Mountain View's downtown so very attractive to visitors and residents? What about addressing new EPA urban runoff requirements by adding green elements to the public right-of-way?

In the end, saving money may very well have an added benefit - it may pave the path to a more attractive, healthy and environmentally sound community.

Could It Be That We Are Overestimating Future Road Capacity Requirements? A recent article inThe New York Times (Thursday, June 20, 2013) notes that per capita driving in the U.S. is down 8.75% and is now to 1996 levels.

This turnaround is all the more impressive due to the fact that for the previous six decades, vehicle miles traveled (VMT) continued to rise every year, fueled by cheap gasoline, more highways, suburban development and women entering the workforce. And while one might credit the recession for the decrease in driving, this does not appear to be the case. From 2010 to 2012, during the time the economy was bouncing back, driving was headed in the opposite direction. Today, Americans are logging fewer miles, they are less likely to get a driver's license and they've bought fewer vehicles.

Baby boomers (the most auto-centric generation in U.S. history) started reaching 65 two years ago. (*US PIRG, A New Direction: Our Changing Relationship with Driving and the Implications for America's Future*) At the same time, even Motor Trend Magazine has noted that young people are driving less. Millennials are looking for a lifestyle that does not include the same dependence upon a car that they experienced as children. (*Motor Trend Magazine, August 2012, Why Young People Are Driving Less: Is the Car Over?*)

As Ron Milam suggests, it is probably time for local officials to seriously question today's transportation models that calculate needs for new road and highway capacity while ignoring current trends in reduced VMT. We do have money for transportation spending; the problem is that we are putting it in the wrong place.

Looking into the future, there seems to be agreement by many that smarter investments are needed. Throwing money at highways has been proven to increase congestion, not

decrease it, and the fact that these new roads must be maintained will further stress transportation budgets in the future.

It seems a more fiscally prudent path would be to repair our existing roads and prioritize new investments in more sustainable forms of transportation including a transit, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure.

Looking to the Past to Predict the Future - A Story for California: It is remote, small and a decidedly red state, yet today Utah's Salt Lake City leads the entire country in per-capita transit spending. Can the direction taken by this city possibly predict what is to happen in California's future?

In 1997, a small group of local Salt Lake City businessmen became concerned about the speed and direction of growth in their region. Not men to sit back and worry, they led an effort called *Envision Utah* that would educate the public and decision makers about the issues and consequences associated with various land use planning alternatives.

Transit: Salt Lake City's preferred transportation option.

The *Envision Utah* project included the development and modeling of four regional growth scenarios that clearly illustrated the consequences of varying growth patterns and transportation investments. The scenarios ranged from a low-density alternative with predominantly auto-oriented development to a high-density transit-oriented alternative with more compact growth and higher levels of infill and redevelopment. Extensive public outreach formed the foundation of a *Quality Growth Strategy* for the region, which was adopted by the Utah State Legislature in 1999 and has informed regional and local decisions ever since. Today this little city is leading the nation in transit investments, building light rail, bus rapid transit, streetcars and commuter rail, all at the same time.

Does the *Envision Utah* exercise sound familiar? It should! Having been introduced to this project by our grant manager at the Hewlett Foundation, the Local Government Commission brought it back to California and featured it at our very first Smart Growth conference, held in 1999 in partnership with the Urban Land Institute and the EPA.

The event was attended by LGC member and former LGC Board member, Roger Dickinson, who at that time was a Sacramento county supervisor sitting on the Board of the Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG). Dickinson suggested that SACOG undertake a similar regional effort to that of *Envision Utah*. They did so in 2003, and titled it *The Blueprint*.

Today SACOG is widely recognized as a national leader among Metropolitan Planning Organizations in using scenario planning to involve the public in developing regional transportation/land use. Further, SACOG continues to create the critical computer tools that allow us to take multiple issues - from VMT, to open space protection, to economic health - into account when making these land use and transportation decisions.

Fast forward to another LGC member and former Contra Costa County Supervisor, Sunne Wright McPeak, who took note of the successful efforts of SACOG and a similar effort in the Bay Area in which she had taken a lead. As the Secretary of Business, Transportation and Housing under Governor Schwarzenegger, McPeak dedicated Caltrans transportation funds to every Council of Government in the State to coordinate land use and transportation decisions through a project, also called Blueprint planning. The success of these regional blueprint planning exercises was a necessary first step toward the state adopting a mandate, SB 375, that now requires every MPO to develop a land use /transportation plan that will reduce the amount of miles we drive in every region of California.

Will California follow Salt Lake City's leadership? At first glance, it looks hopeful. Think about the birthplace of the freeway, the City of Los Angeles, which only yesterday was chocking on the fumes of too much auto exhaust. Today the city that invented drive-thru restaurants has 292 miles of bike lanes, has expanded light rail by 26% in the past eight years, and has another 18 miles of track coming by 2015. Los Angeles now has an international reputation as a leader in transit.

It is pretty amazing when you think about it, but the citizens of L.A. are changing their voting patterns and their lifestyles. In the middle of one of our nation's most serious economic downturns, more than two thirds of L.A. voters chose to increase sales tax by a half-cent and dedicate it all to transit. Recent reports reveal that ridership on L.A. Metro's newest light rail line is increasing at a steady clip of about 1,000 new riders a month. Bus and train ridership in this iconic city of the auto is also on the rise and the total number of passenger cars registered in Los Angeles County has declined. It is a hopeful sign that California may indeed be following the forward-thinking, fiscally prudent example set by Salt Lake City.

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