

RESEARCH YOU CAN USE

Coordinating Land Use and Transportation in Sacramento

Years ago, Uri Avin, Robert Cervero, and I taught a course on coordinating land use and transportation for the National Transit Institute. We would start by asking participants: “Are land use and transportation currently coordinated in your region?” The answer was a consistent “no.”

The next question was: “How do you know they are not coordinated?” To answer our own question, we showed aerials of rail stations surrounded by auto-oriented uses and empty suburban sidewalks. We accompanied the images with charts showing vehicle miles traveled growing faster than lane miles of road capacity.

Our last question was: “Why aren’t they coordinated?” Most of the students brought up divided responsibilities: Transportation is mostly planned by state departments of transportation and metropolitan planning organizations, while land uses are planned and regulated by local governments. But that didn’t seem to be an entirely adequate explanation.

To show that coordination didn’t have to be such a problem, we used the example of Portland, Oregon. We explained that the region’s metropolitan planning organization plans for and programs transportation improvements. It also exercises some control over land-use decisions by maintaining an urban growth boundary and setting density standards for local governments.

We went on to describe Portland Metro’s Land Use, Transportation, and Air Quality project, the granddaddy of scenario planning studies. LUTRAQ compared two very different futures for the west side of Portland: light rail and transit-oriented development versus a beltway (the Western Bypass) and suburban sprawl. Metro opted for the former.

Sometimes we got push-back from participants, who pointed out that Portland Metro is unique among MPOs. After all, it has an independently elected regional governing board, taxing authority, and some control over local land-use decisions. It is easy for Portland, the

NTI participants would say, but how about us? How about other MPOs?

In fact, MPOs often do little more than rubber-stamp the transportation projects of state DOTs and local public works departments. Many take local land-use plans and projections as a given, to which they can only respond by building more roads.



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How SACOG does it

With the exception of Portland Metro, the Sacramento Area Council of Governments may be the most innovative MPO in the nation. It doesn’t have an independently elected governing board or a regional taxing authority, or the power to establish an urban growth boundary. Still, it is a major player in coordinated land-use and transportation planning in the Sacramento region.

Partly that’s because of its top leadership: Mike McKeever, now CEO, who came from Portland, and Gordon Garry, director of research and analysis. Both of them work well with the political powers in the

region. Just as important is SACOG’s record of making smart decisions, decisions that could be taken by any MPO.

The regional transportation plan produced by SACOG in 2002 anticipated a huge increase in congestion and deterioration in air quality. The agency’s executive director, Martin Tuttle, and then project manager, Mike McKeever, responded by instituting the Blueprint Planning process, its version of scenario planning. By comparing a trend scenario to a preferred scenario, the Blueprint process made it clear that sprawl had negative consequences—which could be avoided.

The process allowed local officials to reach a consensus on a future land-use plan. The prevailing attitude—don’t mess with our land uses—began to soften. Since then, Sacramento, Roseville, Rancho Cordova, and several other jurisdictions have changed their general plans to be consistent with the region’s preferred plan, or in the case of the city of Sacramento, to surpass it.

In 1994, SACOG became one of the first MPOs to forecast walk and bike



trips as well as motorized trips. Many MPOs still don’t. In 2007, it switched from a trip-based travel model to one that recognizes that many trips are linked together into “tours” (a stop at Starbucks on the way to work). SACOG was also one of the first MPOs to use a web-based

mapping scenario tool (I-PLACES) and a second-generation economic land-use model (MEPLAN). It's now using UrbanFootprint scenario software and PECAS, a third-generation land-use model. Most MPOs have yet to employ their first land-use model.

Early on, SACOG decided to earmark transportation funds for local governments that plan or implement smart growth projects. The sums involved aren't huge, but local governments are attracted by the discretionary funding available through SACOG's "community design" program. SACOG also stepped up coordination with its constituent governments as part of the Blueprint process. By contrast, most MPOs act as though they have no influence over local governments.

Where SACOG has really emerged as a leader is in climate action. As described in an earlier column (December 2011), California MPOs are playing a key role in achieving greenhouse gas reductions. McKeever worked with a state senator to craft SB 375, the 2006 legislation that gave MPOs a major role, and chaired the committee that set standards for GHG reductions.

As for the future of MPOs, Gordon Garry says: "The improvements in analysis, engagement, and partnerships that SACOG and other regions have instituted will become even more critical as government resources are constrained but needs continue to grow." Amen. ■

Reid Ewing

Ewing is a professor of city and metropolitan planning at the University of Utah and an associate editor of *JAPA*. Many of his past columns are available at www.plan.utah.edu/?page_id=509.

LETTERS

No big loss

As an avid reader of your magazine, who hopes soon to become a certified planner, I would like to express my thoughts about redevelopment authorities ("California Scrambles," February).

In general, it seems to me, RDAs operate in the most expensive way possible. It is a fact that government, as an entity, is the least efficient way to do anything.

Witness the high-speed rail conflagration in California and the recent collapse of cities throughout the U.S. For an RDA to use tax money to provide for development that should and could be privately accomplished with efficient and effective leadership simply inhibits growth.

Californians are now paying more than 65 percent of their income in taxes. How can someone earning less than seven figures survive on a disposable income that is 35 percent of gross? The affordable housing crisis is a result. Simply put, there is no private money left to invest. It all goes into taxes, which are used to pay for unnecessary government programs, wages, and benefits. The situation will get worse as the tax base declines when people decide they can no longer manage to live in California.

—Joseph E. Herbert
*Sailfast Development
Toms River, New Jersey*

Change for the worse

Regarding "Where Schools Are Change Agents" (February): I've worked in the trenches of neighborhood development in Detroit for years. Few would dispute that the Detroit Public Schools need renovated or new buildings as part of the effort to improve one of the nation's poorest performing school districts. But while the district prides itself on spending a large amount of bond money in record time, it should be pointed out that the way the facility decisions were made did not follow widely accepted planning methods.

In neighborhoods that have seen some of the city's largest housing investments, DPS has backed out of prior commitments to renovate old schools or to build new ones. Instead, the district has closed walkable, neighborhood-oriented schools all over the city. Closing schools in stable or reviving neighborhoods means extensive busing and driving for students and parents to get to the new school buildings.

Many of the new buildings and consolidated schools have very large student populations at a time when leading educators acknowledge that smaller schools create more successful learning environments.

The bond funds favored new construction rather than reuse. As a result, many historic school buildings were simply abandoned. Yet many high-performing suburban school districts in the Detroit area and nationally use their historic school buildings very successfully. They are a point of pride for generations of alumni. All of that is lost with the abandonment and demolition of school buildings that are part of Detroit's cultural history.

The social aspect of schools and their neighborhoods seems to have been ignored in the city's haste to spend the bond money.

—Brian Vosburg, AICP
Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan

On target

I really appreciate Paul Farmer's thoughts on democracy and citizen engagement, and the obligation of planners to support both (Perspectives, March). It is so important to the success of our work and the fundamental principles of this country. I think a blanket assumption of American exceptionalism is both dangerous and arrogant, but I do think our commitment to civic engagement, though far from perfect, is our strength.

—Eileen Figel
Chicago

Letters may be edited before publication. Address them to Sylvia Lewis, Editor, *Planning*, 205 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1200, Chicago, IL 60601; e-mail: slewis@planning.org.

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Rx for all cities everywhere

Planet of Cities (2012; Lincoln Institute of Land Policy; 340 pp.; \$40) is a massively documented and clearly presented attempt to change thinking about cities. Author Shlomo Angel, a visiting fellow at the Lincoln Institute, argues that what he calls the Containment Paradigm (e.g., smart growth) is "next to useless" for dealing with the key issues facing cities in the developing world. Instead, he proposes a Making Room Paradigm "that seeks to come to terms with the expected expan-