

Guest Commentary - Practice Civil Disobedience:

By David Coffin

News item - LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - Los Angeles residents were urged on Wednesday to take shorter showers, reduce lawn sprinklers and stop throwing trash in toilets in a bid to cut water usage by 10 percent in the driest year on record. With downtown Los Angeles seeing a record low of 4 inches of rain since July 2006 — less than a quarter of normal — and with a hot, dry summer ahead, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said “Los Angeles needs to change course and conserve water to steer clear of this perfect storm... The combination of record-low rainfall, the second-lowest snow pack ever recorded and a potentially very hot summer is a perfect storm that could put Los Angeles into a drought.”



In recent weeks we've been deluged with radio and TV advertising by the Metropolitan Water District's Be Water Wise asking us to conserve water and the State of California's Flex Your Power! program that implores us to turn off our appliances in the afternoons but the question is: why is this happening?

While conservation is always a good idea, conservation at the magnitude that is being expected of Californians is a symptom of a much larger policy problem, and not simply a temporary solution to a seasonal problem.

The problem is tied to the blind acceptance of state and local predictions of population growth and the housing initiatives that are meant to accommodate it.

The predicted population increases are huge. A 2007 California Department of Finance report predicts at today's rate Los Angeles will grow from 9.6 million to 13.1 million. Other counties include:

- Orange County will grow from 2.9 million to 4.0 million
- Riverside County will grow from 1.6 million to 4.7 million
- San Bernardino will grow from 1.7 million to 3.7 million
- San Diego will grow from 2.9 million to 4.5 million

Simple math tells us that planners are predicting an explosion of population growth in Southern California from today's 18.7 million to 30 million in 2050. It doesn't stop there however. To make matters worse yet, statewide growth is expected to almost double from 34 million to 60 million and in both regions, planners and policymakers are hell bent on delivering housing to accommodate that growth.

How are they accomplishing this?



There are two ways that city leaders market these high growth policies and depending on the audience they're speaking to, they'll pitch one or the other to you.

The Affordable Housing Pitch is where reduced price condos or apartments set aside by developers who gleefully accept housing bonus's that let them add additional units to a project that is normally zoned for fewer units.

We're told that "homes are getting to expensive and the only way to resolve that is by offering incentives to developers to set aside units that will sell at below market value." Developers wouldn't do that of course unless there was something in it for them and of course city policymakers have something.

In an article called Sky's the limit for L.A. (Aug. 30th), Daily News staff writer Kerry Cavanaugh, describes affordable housing this way: under a state law that took effect in 2005, California cities, including Los Angeles, are required to give such density bonuses to developers.

Drafted by Sen. Dennis Hollingsworth of Temecula, the legislation was designed to make it easier for developers to build affordable housing.

But to do that, the law overrides local zoning codes and says cities must allow developers to build larger and taller buildings, with fewer parking spaces, when they include affordable units.

Cities have been working to come up with local ordinances to conform with the state law, which means a developer could get an extra 20 percent to 35 percent more height or floor area, depending on the number of affordable units included.

For example, a developer could buy an old two-story duplex in Sherman Oaks and, under current zoning rules, demolish it and build a new 30-unit apartment building up to 45 feet in height - or three stories. If the developer agrees to rent six of those units to low-income families, the building could be as tall as four stories.

Solving the Traffic Woes Pitch - Also known as Smart Growth, this marketing technique is perhaps the latest to sell high growth development. It is described almost entirely in automotive terms. Reducing traffic, or eliminating grid lock, reducing sprawl and offering people a place to work and live without having to travel by car, and offering mass transit everywhere. Never mind that people change jobs or that mass transit can't be everywhere in a region like Southern California.

To succeed you would need a one-hundred billion dollar major transit system crisscrossing across the width and length of 469 square mile city every ten blocks and even at that, you would still have to convince people to abandon their cars and get on a bus to take you to a train where at the end of the line another bus is waiting to take you to work. At the end of the day you would have to reverse the process.

Los Angeles City nerd writes in a blog entry called Nine Crane Salute! :

Somebody in Downtown get a camera! I've never been one to be a great photographer, so even though I had a digital camera as I drove up the I 10 through downtown today, there's no way I could have captured what I encountered and counted. Just north of Staples, from the I 10 looking out over the LA Live project, I saw before me nine cranes at rest. These nine cranes (unless I missed one) were for more than just LA Live, though; they were building the City. Residential construction, entertainment construction, business construction - it was all happening. It was a Nine Crane Salute to the City.

Smart Growth is producing some of the worst and most dramatic examples of over-development we've ever seen. Examples include the Playa del Oro high density project that places 500+ units on a mere 7 acre site in Westchester; downtowns Grand Ave project, the Century City twin 47 story condominium project. The Wilshire/Western 22 story condominium project; the 40 story Koreatown condominium project; the 76 story Park Fifth Tower with 732 residential units.

Avoiding the truth.

So while we're solving the affordable problem and we're solving the traffic problem has anyone noticed whether either of these are getting any better...? Anybody??

The drawbacks to both housing strategies offered by policymakers and planners is that neither strategies solve the problems they promise to solve and both of them create huge burdens on our fixed resources. Traffic can't be reduced while your simultaneously doubling the population. People who buy into Smart Growth condos will likely have to change jobs someday in today's economy. Mass transit will never be as prolific as it is in places like Manhattan, New York where you simply change buses.

Our policy makers and planners are not dealing honestly with the public and treating housing as the zero sum game as nature demands.

Rather than fight these proposals, the City of Los Angeles is bending over backwards to embrace them. They believe that they can expand it forever.

Whether housing development is marketed towards reducing the need to commute or affordable housing, each high housing scheme that's marketed adds a significantly burden to the city, Water. The average person requires 43,000 gallons per year. The average family of four 160,000 gallons.

Will Southern California's system be able to offer the Southland an additional 2.5 million acre feet of water simply to meet the average resident's usage? This question doesn't even address the regions commercial needs. And how about the needs of the rest of the state known for its North vs. South water wars. Will the states water have an extra 4.5 million acre feet for just the residents alone? What about the additional agricultural and commercial needs that would have to be ramped up to meet a population expected to double in forty years?

All Southern California counties today compete for water supplies from roughly the same source. Los Angeles gets most of its water from the Los

Angeles Aqueduct which comes from the Owens Valley and Mono Lake regions. In recent years however it has had to purchase water from other agencies such as the Metropolitan Water District who gets its water from the state water project and the Colorado river aqueduct. Nearly all counties in Southern California receive their water from the MWD.

Don't expect much help from mother nature who has a habit of not yielding to human expectations. We are at nature's mercy.

Adding more pipe to deliver water and more storage to create water reserves is an expensive feel good measure that makes politicians feel like they are doing their job but it will not work unless more water becomes available.

One example is Las Vegas. Southern Nevada Water Authority general manger Pat Mulroy convinced the water board to spend an extra \$45 million for new pumps, doubling the capacity of the second water intake drawing drinking water from Lake Mead for its recent explosive growth.



The problem however is that in three years the lake's water level will likely drop below the first drinking water intake - making it useless.

In 2010, the equivalent of 256,000 people in the Las Vegas region will not have water. By 2011, the gap in water use and water supply would affect 404,000 people. The problem rises to half a million people by 2012.

Shari Buck a Water Authority board member said "Understand that we cannot conserve our way out of a drought"

State and local policymakers need to come to grips with the fact that there ARE LIMITS to housing in the California. There are no more William Mulholland's to lead us into the next century of worry free water supplies. Blindly following developers will lead us down the road to ruin.

The reality is that there are fundamental limits to how much housing this arid region can supply. We are already experiencing the early manifestations of an open development policy. Rationing of water and electricity supplies, finding solid waste disposal sites, sewage control, traffic gridlock, overcrowded schools, etc. are all symptoms of an overpopulated region.

Villaraigosa was right, we need to change course. However, what he and other city and state policymakers fail to identify is the proper course of action. He thinks we can simultaneously conserve, double our population, and develop our way out of this perfect storm.

(Original posting: August 31st, 2007 by Westchester dad. David Coffin serves on the board of the Neighborhood Council of Westchester-Playa del Rey.)