

LA Weekly June 20, 2007

Smarting Over Growth

One of the most amazing things to me as I read David Zahniser's story (and frankly any time I hear about "un-dense Los Angeles") was the false premise that underlies the entire argument about the need for "densifying smart growth" in Los Angeles: that the city is not already very densely populated. Just a cursory look at the numbers reveals the truth: With a population of about 4 million, and total city square mileage of 475, you get a per-square-mileage density number of just under 10,000. That's pretty dense as it is, but also very misleading — about 100 square miles of L.A. proper contain the rugged Santa Monica Mountains range, which bisects the city and the Valley. Deduct that and you're at 375 square miles, divided roughly equally by the L.A. basin side of the city and the Valley. The basin side holds about 2.8 million people, so now you're looking at a density number of around 15,000 per square mile — very, very high density (close to that of tiny, packed San Francisco). Lack of density is not the problem when it comes to our commuting/transportation woes. It's much more likely to be the disastrously incompetent zoning and transportation planning over many decades that favored the car and developers, and which clearly continues to this day.

I personally like urban density and have nothing against it, but let's start with reality and plan from there. When something is so obviously being misrepresented, you have to wonder: Are the people putting forth the "we need more density to solve our transportation problems" argument cynical liars? Or just ignorant? I'm not entirely sure which scenario is worse...

Eddie Dunlop
Los Angeles

Great group of articles on "smart" growth. The conundrum in this whole thing is that we really do need a solution to a growing housing problem. But, as with all things, the devil is in the details. L.A. was never meant to be a dense city. We don't have the infrastructure to make it happen. We also don't have a working central core. Dense communities don't have to be horrible places to live. But unless the proper infrastructure is in place *first*, it can never succeed. After all, the money is in the building, not in the serving.

David Zahniser, in his excellent article on smart growth, says, "Of course, there's nothing inherently bad about living in a single-family neighborhood." But he goes on to point out that it really depends on where that single-family neighborhood is located. If it's in the hills of Silver Lake or Bel Air, that's okay — but if it's in the San Gabriel or San Fernando valleys, it's quintessential dumb growth. I think that goes to the heart of one of the smart growth movement's problems — elitism and lack of a broad socioeconomic base. I get the impression it writes off the suburbs surrounding the city that are home to families raising children. There are reasons those families desire an affordable house, a yard, a garage and plenty of room for storage. Most of these families would find living in an in-town condo inappropriate for their lifestyles. In order to be really successful — and not just an upscale niche phenomenon — the smart growth movement must take into account the needs and desires of middle- and working-class families.

Larry Kaplan
Los Angeles

David Zahniser's article "What's Smart About Smart Growth?" was right on! It's simply obscene that some of L.A.'s elected officials and city planners think that we can continue to pack more people into L.A. and solve traffic problems with buses. That they believe nearly every major street in L.A. should go high density shows they have no connection to the residents of this town.

This kind of urban apocalypse doesn't need to happen. We don't have to convert our communities into wall-to-wall high-rises. We also don't have to let our state be 500 miles of sprawl, from San Diego to Sacramento. We could instead be a state with a 1,000-mile-long mega-park system from Oregon to the Mexican border with permanently preserved farmland greenbelts around every major city, with connected open-space rings that link the state together. Think it can't happen? It already is. Read success stories on our Web site, www.connectingcalifornia.org.

Communities and cities around California are not falling for the mantra that "growth is always good." Instead many are drawing lines and saying no more paving of our farmland and wetlands or chopping down our forests. The growth that they choose to allow is targeted for city centers. Most of the rest of this state doesn't want their towns to

look like L.A. — wall to wall concrete. And as a lifelong L.A. resident, I'm tired of this town looking like that too. We can and must retrofit this city to make it more liveable — but livability and economic vitality can happen without opening the floodgates to mega development everywhere.

Smart growth has been discredited as a believable urban strategy simply because, as Zahniser points out, the phrase has been misused so much by developers that it has no meaning. Smart growth in practice is often dumb growth.

Smart growth has as its base the core belief that growth can never be stopped. It's a disease that has afflicted politicians in this region for decades: the belief that continuous growth can always be accommodated. Smart growth as a concept simply ignores major realities: our streets are full and there's no more room to add more buses; we are losing our water supply due to growth elsewhere and due to global warming; paving over even more of our city and building ever higher is no guarantee that elected officials will stop our city from sprawling into Bakersfield or Las Vegas. Growth is a never-ending circle of problems needing solutions that create their own set of problems. When you widen a highway, does traffic get better or does the city use this as an excuse to approve more developments, which then fills up the space, creating the need for even more widened roads?

Smart growth is championed by developer think tanks whose propaganda is ever changing: Sometimes we're not building enough office and industrial buildings. After they get their way, they say we're not building enough housing for those who'll work in all that "needed" industrial space. The growth cycle continues.

It's hilarious that so many advocates of a dense L.A. live in low- or ultra-low-density neighborhoods far away from the traffic disasters they are pushing for. I remember how in the 1990s the president of the Playa Vista company, Nelson Rising, lectured residents that "the era of the single-family quarter-acre home is over." He, of course, lived 20 miles away from his massive project in a multi-acre mansion in La Cañada.

Playa Vista was originally sold to the West L.A. community on the promise that there would be streets full of ground-floor retail with apartments and condos on top to encourage "walkability" and to discourage the 7,000 new residents from having to leave the project and jam up area traffic. "Live, work and play in Playa Vista" was the promise. But with their promised mixed-use neighborhood 95 percent done, instead of 22 mixed-use buildings we have three. Smart growth was a sales pitch that never came true.

Smart growth for our region is simply no solution as long as politicians continue to refuse to consider limits on development and population growth. Some development boosters say a city that doesn't grow will die. What a load of crap! Slowing down or halting growth is not stagnation, it's stability. It's living within our means.

In L.A. we need to change our civic planning policies to deal with existing needs not future developer needs.

Let's convert vacant office and warehouse space into affordable housing. L.A. has a surplus of jobs space compared to existing housing, urban planners keep telling us. Let's build elevated light rail lines alongside every freeway; no more added traffic lanes for cars, buses and other polluters. Elevated means the land below can be parks for our existing residents, which are in real short supply in L.A., or treatment wetlands for urban runoff (as Judith Lewis described in her *L.A. Weekly* cover story last November, <http://www.laweekly.com/general/features/the-lost-streams-of-los-angeles/14973/>). The rail lines will not compete with cars for space on the roads, and if the rail lines go everywhere the freeways go, we have the potential to remove a lot of traffic from the freeways. As long as we have rail links and stops at the major job centers, we can make rail be competitive with solo car driving.

Finally, let's halt sprawl by finishing the greenbelt around Los Angeles that has been created by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. Let's buy the Tejon Ranch, the biggest proposed sprawl development between L.A. and Bakersfield to the north.

Let's choose to live within our means rather than continue to burst at the seams.

Rex Frankel
Director, Connecting California

As a transit rider for the past 15 years, I know all too well the difficulties of bus travel in Southern California. I sit in buses stuck in traffic, moving at the slow speeds referenced by David Zahniser in his article "What's Smart About Smart Growth?" The Rapid Wilshire Bus, and any bus, is not rapid while stuck in traffic. And due to the stiff suspension needed to support its length, the Rapid Wilshire shakes like a blender on the chop cycle when it is able to travel at the posted speed limit, which makes for a bone-jarring ride. The creation of more light rail and subway lines to move people is the bottom-line remedy to the worsening gridlock. Buses will always be needed in this mega city, but due to their slower speeds and the distances needed to traverse the sprawl, they are inadequate. Moreover, the transit rider is better served by the easier boarding and exiting on rail and subway cars. They are able to carry more people faster and more comfortably.

I am a frequent rider of the Santa Monica No. 3 and occasionally ride the Metro No. 115 bus routes highlighted in the article. The article did not do enough research into the bus schedules, and gives an incomplete scenario about the transfer from the No. 3 to the No. 115 at Lincoln and Manchester. Had a schedule for the No. 115 been obtained, it would show that buses are added to the line at Manchester and Sepulveda to carry the increased number of riders as the buses head east on Manchester. Instead of getting off at Manchester and Lincoln to catch a No. 115, all a rider needs to do is to take the Local No. 3 further east to the intersection of Manchester to Sepulveda and get off there. At this intersection the No. 115 runs much more frequently. The rider could also catch the Express No. 315 at Sepulveda and Manchester, which follows the same route east.

But Metro makes this a difficult stop. The No. 115 stop is on Manchester west of Sepulveda. The No. 315 stop is on Sepulveda across the intersection. The two stops are about 75 yards apart, separated by six lanes on Sepulveda Boulevard. For riders to catch either the faster Express No. 315 or slower Local No. 115, they must play a cat-and-mouse game and stand at the edge of the corner at the intersection near either one of the bus stops: Whichever one gets there first is the one to ride. Having two different stops for these two buses, on opposite sides of Sepulveda, creates difficulties for transit riders and wastes their time.

Without question mass transit in Southern California needs improvement, and with a scarcity of rail lines and subways, buses are the workhorses. But buses are limited. It requires work, research ingenuity and dogged determination from the transit rider to make the transit system work and to overcome the obstacles. A person just stepping up to a bus stop without schedules and knowledge of the routes stands a good chance of suffering from the inefficiencies in the system. They then give up, get back into their vehicles and make the traffic even worse.

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