

# Policy Brief

California State University, Los Angeles

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## FACING THE TRANSPORTATION QUESTION

The infamous auto dependency of the Southern California region and the resulting economic and social costs were underscored in the 2005 State of the Region report produced by the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG). Of the nation's nine largest metropolitan areas, Southern California had the third highest vehicle ownership (93%) and the third lowest share of workers using transit to commute to work (4.5%), while ranking last in average payroll and per capita income. Costs resulting from congestion totaled almost \$12 billion in 2003, significantly higher than any other metropolitan region. Undeniably, Southern California (particularly Los Angeles and Orange Counties) continues to be ranked as the metropolitan region with the most congestion and worst air pollution in the nation.

Southern California's transportation woes are directly related to its urban form, which celebrates auto-dependency and increases decentralization of housing and employment. Added to this unsustainable approach to urban design has been the cost of creating and maintaining a reasonably operational infrastructure. Given the added knowledge about the age and the near capacity operational status of current roads and bridges, transportation planning—which includes all aspects of efficient movement of goods and people by air, water, rail, and roads—becomes a formidable task in California. The projected population growth over the next few decades can only worsen the current conditions if nothing is done to improve our transportation system.

The future of California and its economy largely depends on our willingness to improve the infrastructure and pay close attention to urban transportation, because it relates to issues of eq-

uity and efficiency in access to affordable housing, health care, and education. Transportation is the bloodline of our cities and the quality of life they offer. Not investing time and money to resolve our transportation challenges will surely worsen current conditions and diminish our ability to solve our many problems. Maintaining California's position as the fifth largest economy in the world is unimaginable if traffic worsens, roads and bridges fall apart, and our working class population spends hours reaching jobs on buses that cannot connect employees and employers in an equitable manner. As the successful campaign of Bus Riders Union revealed, we cannot engage in a transportation planning process that remains at best blinded to class divisions, or at worst aggravates them, by assigning buses to the working class and rail to the middle class. In addition to the technical challenges facing us, we need to be aware that transportation as a medium of connectivity can become either an instrument of equity or separation. We can only hope that California is working toward the former and not the latter.

The purpose of this policy brief is to reinvigorate our discussions on transportation planning and move closer to understanding the formidable task ahead. Knowing that a comprehensive presentation is outside the scope of a policy brief, we have selected a number of topics that can be a good start for ongoing conversations on this topic.

### Consider This...

The goals of transportation planning can be reduced either to capacity building (i.e., planning the supply-side) or to managing/maximizing the performance of the transportation system (i.e.,

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managing the demand-side). For urban transportation, the latter includes efforts to reduce the number of trips and traveled miles, as well as increasing the flow of traffic. Over the last few decades, we have gradually become aware that while investment in infrastructure is necessary, only demand management will yield the best results in enhancing our overall transportation experience, while protecting our investments in the transportation network.

Despite much research in the last several decades on the advantages of demand-side strategies, however, few regions have fully implemented comprehensive programs and policies using such a planning framework. This was partially caused by putting all eggs in the proverbial basket of Travel Reduction Ordinances (TROs), which focused on travel to work habits of employees at major employment sites. Given that only a small portion of the working population was employed at such sites and that a small percentage of this population shifted from driving alone to other modes of transportation, the net result was an undetectable reduction in trips within the larger metropolitan areas (as was the case for Regulation XV in Southern California). Though TROs faded away, the ideas behind transportation demand management and transportation control measures were never fully abandoned. After all, decades of research does suggest that we cannot simply expand highway lanes to accommodate a growing number of automobiles. The smarter, more sustainable, approach continues to be a strategy to reduce the number of cars and miles traveled on our freeways. This does not suggest that we do not keep an eye on capacity building. It simply means that a focus on demand management could reduce our growing congestion, improve our environment, and address social equity in a more reasonable and less costly manner.

In this policy brief, we do not plan to address supply-side issues and discuss how many more miles of roads we need to build. Instead, we want to resurrect some of the ideas behind sustainable transportation planning. As indicated, we won't be able to list all possible ideas or even present the entirety of discussions within a single topic. Instead, we have envisioned this policy brief as the starting point for another round of discussions, while the Mayor of Los Angeles and the Governor offer their visions for a better transportation system, from both supply and demand sides. Here, we will review the current state of thinking on several pertinent planning issues in urban transportation, which we believe are of special relevance to the region.

## **Minding Sustainability**

The changing geography of cities, from highly centralized to multiple centers and subcenters, has created an arduous task for transportation planners. The various ways transportation affects the quality-of-life or "livability" of a city is increasingly a priority for planners, developers, and communities alike. In an effort to improve the long-term economic, social, and environmental viability of transportation in places such as Los Angeles, researchers point to three necessary areas of demand-side planning: higher attention to the interconnection of land use and transportation, improvements in public transportation, and innovative transportation demand management techniques.

## **The Land Use/Transportation Connection**

Even as the relative cost of transportation has declined and access to it, especially freeway access in the suburbs, has increased, most would agree that urban structure is inextricably linked to transportation. In connection with urban structure, two interrelated issues are hotly debated: job-housing balance and spatial mismatch. These two phenomena developed out of the decentralization process experienced by many cities across the United States. Though many forces contributed to this process, several major events are noteworthy, including the suburbanization of housing after WWII, freeway construction, and more recently, the dispersal of employment in pursuit of specialized workforces, agglomeration advantages, and low property values.

Unfortunately the dispersal of employment has not adequately aligned with the corresponding labor supply due to fluctuations in the economy and labor force. Job-housing imbalances can be detected by lengthy commute patterns and long distances between employment centers and employees. The exact nature of the job-housing balance varies depending on a range of characteristics that influence job-housing preference, including, but not limited to, occupation, income, gender, ethnicity, and the presence of multiple income earners. Additionally, growth in California's employment opportunities has outpaced housing construction, thereby further exasperating the job-housing balance.

The second structural issue points to the effects of decentralization on minorities in the United States who have remained largely isolated in central cities as a result of inequitable housing opportunities. The concentration of low-income, minority residents in the central city, and the suburbanization of employment, especially low-wage job centers, has created what is known as a "spatial mismatch." The lack of access to jobs, rather than the lack of available jobs, is often cited as a dominant force barring ethnic groups from upward socioeconomic mobility. Research also indicates that the limited transportation options available to low-income, minority populations restricts their employment opportunities, especially to higher paying jobs in the suburbs.

Research conducted by the Pat Brown Institute identified several communities experiencing a job-housing imbalance in Los Angeles County, including South Los Angeles, the western San Gabriel Valley, and the northern and southern areas of the San Fernando Valley. Neighborhoods

within these geographies appear to have a larger employed resident population than people working in them. Furthermore, they are also affected by proportionally low levels of public transit service. For the region as a whole, transit accessibility was found to be highest along the east-west corridor that parallels Interstate 10, and lowest for connections requiring north-south mobility. Moreover, low income communities throughout the county have disproportionately lower levels of access to bus services. Spatial mismatch is evident in the overall job-housing balance for the region and by the insufficient transit needed to connect employees to their workplaces.

Fundamentally, the disconnect between land use and transportation planning has led to the appearance of an imbalance in job-housing or the creation of spatial mismatch conditions. Without creating a comprehensive planning link between urban development, land use, and transportation, we will continue to engage in remedial activities that will be costly and less effective. For more than three decades, researchers have pointed to this necessary link and have attempted to focus on trip generation rates of various types of land use, in order to avoid unnecessary/unplanned traffic congestion. Based on this research, development goals should be tested against extra trips generated, impact on roads (which are paid for by the public and not the private-sector developers), and overall quality of life. Development for the sake of development, where maximizing return on investment is the primary goal, will result in imposing unacceptable costs for the society and bringing our traffic to a mere crawl. Sustainable development, which considers mobility and equity as an integral part of economy and quality of life, will obviously engage in strategic decisions that incorporate transportation planning and infrastructure in every aspect of land use and development decision making. Facing a large borrowing against the future to invest in a much needed expansion and maintenance of the infrastructure, Californians would be well-served to demand principles of smart growth and sustainability while spending this money. Otherwise, any expansion in capacity will soon be met by haphazard development that is at best inequitable and at worst a misuse of public dollars for private gains.

### **Example of Transportation/Land Use Connection**

A frequently cited example of successful land-use/transportation integration is Portland, Oregon, best known for its integrated vision incorporating transportation, housing, employment, and land-use. In the 1970s, Portland turned down a new freeway proposal, opting instead for a light-rail system, transit priority measures, urban growth boundaries, and mixed-use and higher density land-use solutions. Portland's long-term success is attributed to the coordination and involvement of regional agencies and public and private stakeholders. As a result of this inclusive planning approach, Portland's downtown has experienced numerous benefits, including outstanding light-rail ridership levels, a large increase in jobs with no increase in car commuting to the central area, an improved local economy, diverse housing options, and spillover pedestrian-friendly development in the suburbs.

### **Reinvesting in Public Transportation**

Researchers argue that the familiar congestion-related problems found in cities such as Los Angeles (costly gas prices, lengthy commutes, lack of parking, and poor air quality) can be mediated through a more balanced, multimodal transportation system. This perspective calls for an integrated transportation system, where multiple types of transportation are supported, including walking, bicycling, buses, and rail, not just autos. Given the auto-designed urban structure and heavy auto subsidization, achieving a balanced transportation system requires policies and programs that offer transit incentives and auto disincentives. It is worth revisiting some of the benefits of well-designed mass transit, especially those applicable to cities with multiple centers, such as Los Angeles.

To begin, transit is agreed to have two crucial features. The first role of transit, as a public system, is to provide a social service to most of the population, unlike private auto ownership. Therefore, in large cities especially, transit is considered a basic service critical to those without access to cars. Transit comprises fixed rail, best employed in places with high-population densities and employment or recreation centers, and buses, desirable in regions with low-housing density and dispersed economic and social activities. Transit's role as a basic service is particularly critical for low-income adults who depend more heavily on public transportation, specifically buses, than other groups.

For both men and women, the number of trips and the distance traveled increases with income level, reflecting the mobility inequity present in different modes of urban transportation and access to them. Furthermore, welfare recipients and other low-income groups face specific challenges associated with transportation because they engage in frequent job searches to multiple and dispersed locations. Women's transportation needs are also a topic of much interest due to their increasing participation in the workforce, yet disproportionate share of household responsibilities. Entry-level service jobs also often require traveling to work during nonpeak hours or on weekends when public transit frequency is minimal or nonexistent. Moreover, because the majority of new jobs are being created in the suburbs, central city residents often face a challenging "reverse commute," using a transportation infrastructure designed for the traditional suburb to city journey.

Improved transit solutions are often seen as the best way to mediate several of the aforementioned, and often interconnected, urban structural

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dilemmas, including the job-housing imbalance, spatial mismatch, and reverse commuting. Given the challenges associated with the long-term relocation of either specific work forces or employment centers, transit—buses in particular—are viewed by researchers as a means of economic development capable of reducing social inequities. The Los Angeles Department of Transportation's (LADOT) Route 422, a laudable example, operates on a reverse commute schedule to connect low-wage service jobs to unskilled workers who have limited mobility options.

The second major feature of public transit—efficiency—is evident in transit's ability to move larger volumes of people, use less space, and impart fewer negative side effects than the auto. Illuminated in case studies worldwide, economically, socially, and environmentally healthy cities necessitate diverse transportation options. Successful multimodal transportation systems all include an extensive transit component. Though fixed rail plays an important role in a multimodal city, the needs of decentralized cities such as Los Angeles can often be better met through rapid bus systems that offer flexible routes, catering to shifting employment, housing, and recreational needs.

Even in the bastion of auto dependency, Southern California's transit network has been increasingly used and applauded. The Los Angeles County Metro system, including buses and rail, experienced increased ridership within the last year. Important to consider, especially as new transit services are planned, is the goal of connecting people to their actual destinations. Given that trips to work account for only 14.8% of all trips made, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation, access to transit that connects people to shopping and recreational activities is critical for transit to capture additional trips. Though the built environments in cities such as Los Angeles have evolved to their present day multicentered complexities, fixed transit networks continue to use the central business district as their focal destination, even though the majority of employment opportunities are decentralized. Future transit investment, many argue, needs to create a network connecting people to employment, recreational, and shopping centers as opposed to the long-favored radial system useless to the majority of transit riders.

### **Example of Reinvesting in Public Transportation**

Boulder, Colorado, is well-known for its multimodal, integrated regional approach to transportation that is jointly referred to as the “Hop, Skip, and Jump” system. Coordinated land use, shifting budget priorities, and transportation demand management (TDM) strategies (including many auto disincentives) have provided a suitable context for interconnected regional transit. Pedestrian-friendly development, bicycle trails, buses suitable to carry bicycles, and buses connecting to rail all contribute to a diversified transit system. The “Hop, Skip, and Jump” system connects people to local recreational and shopping destinations through medium-size, high-frequency buses (Hop), to employment centers on large, high-frequency buses (Skip), and to communities and suburbs outside Boulder through an additional set of buses (Jump, Leap, Bound). Research shows the collective transportation demand management efforts in Boulder have shifted 42% of former car users who were traveling to downtown to other transportation types.

### **Transportation Demand Management**

Transportation demand management (TDM) is the umbrella under which a whole host of programs and policies are included that aim to reduce both the number and distance of trips taken. Though often implemented individually, transportation demand measures work best when they are combined and supported by multiple stakeholders, including neighborhoods, businesses, developers, and transportation planners. Efforts to increase transit use, while deterring auto use, through well-planned land use has been associated with positive social, economic, and mobility outcomes. Furthermore, planning initiatives that incorporate transportation demand measures emphasize increased accessibility, not just mobility.

Because studies show people are inclined to use transit only if it provides mobility advantages over auto travel, many transportation demand measures involve taking away perceived affordability of cars. The automobile has a long history of subsidization in the United States through highway construction, free parking, and few environmental degradation “fees.” Disincentives often involve attaching the “true cost” to various auto-related activities, such as eliminating free parking, increasing gas taxes, congestion pricing, implementing road usage fees, and parking limits. Reduced auto dependency is almost always contingent upon a combination of transit incentives and auto disincentives.

While “smart growth” may be seen as a development approach, it incorporates many demand management techniques that could benefit decentralized cities such as Los Angeles. The basic premise behind smart growth initiatives is that through coordinated land-use and transportation efforts, existing and future development can be more sustainable than the ubiquitous low-density, auto-dependant “sprawl.” Smart growth seeks to combat the high economic, social, and environmental costs associated with decentralized land use through limited freeway building, increased light rail, and land use that reduces auto dependency. One of the most advocated smart growth strategies, transit oriented development (TOD), unites land use and transportation through mixed use, medium to high-density land use designed to be a short walk from a major transit stop.

The lengthy list of associated benefits increasingly being cited makes transit-oriented development an attractive approach for multiple stakeholders. Recent studies show that when measures of urban structure (city shape, job-housing balance, road density, etc.) and transit supply are taken

together, they have a significant effect on travel demand with the ability to reduce the annual miles driven and car ownership rates. Businesses participating in TOD have been found to benefit from increased revenues, untapped markets, enhanced employee productivity, the attraction of qualified workers, higher property value, and more. Cities, it is argued, become more livable, enjoying reduced congestion and increased access to basic services. New developments can cost tax payers double that of higher density, in-fill projects, thereby conserving resources for infrastructure investment. Through the use of pedestrian-friendly design, residents can reap the well-documented, health-associated benefits of increased exercise by walking to nearby services and transit.

Critics argue that transit-oriented development and smart growth have narrow application, produce inconclusive results, often forget to include affordable housing, and require difficult to achieve regional planning. Yet, others argue that smart growth policies can redirect growth while incorporating the needs of multiple stakeholders. For example, recent regional reports produced by the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) and the University of Southern California (USC) advocate the adoption of a long-term, coordinated smart growth agenda for Southern California. The Mobility 21 Smart Growth partnership, comprising public and private Los Angeles County stakeholders, is working toward this goal and has already identified several locations ideally suited for transit-oriented development.

Reflecting on remarks of Dr. Elizabeth Deakin, at a recent public policy lecture of the Pat Brown Institute, it is important to be realistic about TODs. These developments can be successful, if they are designed correctly; however, they should not be viewed as strategies to increase transit ridership significantly. For that to occur, hundreds of TODs and thousands of housing units would have to be built.

### **Examples of Effective Approaches**

Regions that have successfully implemented transit-oriented development have usually found ways to remove obstacles to smart growth—primarily through the revision of outdated land-use zoning and policies. Through a package of legislation, the state of Maryland made one of the earliest attempts to remove barriers to smart growth by shifting incentives away from sprawling land use to those communities with existing infrastructure. One of the most important and most successful pieces of legislation redirected state development subsidies to designated “priority funding areas” (PFA)—places with existing infrastructure, such as the central city or inner suburbs. Recent research has found priority funding areas to be an effective way of influencing the location of new development.

Advocacy for TODs has faced issues of equity, since a large number of these developments are not affordable for the working-class population. In other words, in some circles, TODs are viewed as middle-class solutions, excluding the needs of low-income and transit-dependent population (people who already ride buses). However, not all TODs are built to be middle-class communities. One the often-cited best practices comes from Chicago: The Lake and Pulaski Project. This project is not only “green” and “smart” but also an example of how issues of equity and empowerment can be (and should be) incorporated into designing and constructing TODs. Through community involvement and multisector support, this project focused on its goals of transportation and land use integration, as well as smart growth principles and various environmental considerations (such as the use of recycled material and “green” design). An important characteristic of this project was its unique participatory approach and special attention to existing community assets. The result is a TOD that successfully integrates community development, environmental advocacy, transportation and land-use planning, and quality of life issues into a single project.