

Harnessing the Transportation/Land-Use Relationship

By Jonathan Levine

The recipe for auto-dependent urban sprawl is no mystery: it's written right into our regulations.

A recent survey on transportation alternatives available to workers in downtown Ann Arbor, Michigan, asked respondents about the system improvements that would encourage them to use those alternatives more. Options included increased public transit frequency, improved

bike lanes, free bus passes, and more. One survey came back with the most telling answer of all written in by hand: "affordable housing in Ann Arbor." The response sums up the relationship between transportation and municipal policies regarding the development of places. Some policies encourage low-density, land-use-separated, auto-oriented development, while others encourage walkability, mixed-use development and are transit friendly. The latter support downtowns and vibrant neighborhoods where people live and work in closer proximity.



Illustration by Breanne Bloomquist

Municipal Regulations

A municipality's land-use regulations, including floor-area-ratio limits, minimum lot-size requirements, restrictions on accessory dwelling units, and parking requirements, affect both the affordability of housing and the viability of transportation alternatives the municipality can offer. Too often, subdivision requirements, zoning regulations, and transportation standards combine to create areas that are only accessible by car—requiring residents to drive many miles just to meet the ordinary needs of an ordinary day. The recipe for auto-dependent urban sprawl is no mystery: it's written right into our regulations.

But isn't this what people want? Americans, we are told, prefer big houses and large lots, and don't mind driving as far as they need to in order to live in areas they can afford that

offer these amenities. If this is the case, perhaps the problem of "auto dependence" is not a problem at all: it's what people choose in order to live the way they want to. Surely no one is forcing the residents of areas designed this way to live in those neighborhoods.

Do Americans Really Want Big Houses on Large Lots?

This version of the American dream has had a strong hold on U.S. planning practice. But if everybody wanted to—and could afford to—live in big houses on large lots accessible only by car, would we really need to protect this particular land-use form from intrusion by more compact living forms? The regulatory prerogative that municipalities zealously guard to keep densities low and land uses separated would hardly be necessary, because buyers and tenants would not

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IT'S THE PEOPLE



be interested in the more compact alternative. The very fact that planning authorities are engaged in regulatory protection of low-density development suggests that more compact alternatives would indeed arise in some areas if the regulatory environment were relaxed.

Different People Want Different Things

It is hardly surprising that in the realm of transportation and land use, research shows that different people want different things: many prefer a low-density auto-oriented environment, while others seek walkability, transit-friendliness, or just the affordability that comes with living in denser areas near one's work and non-work destinations. In other words, there is not a single American dream but a range, and regulations that enshrine large-lot single-family development amount to governmental preference for one dream over others.

If land-use regulations tend to lock in an auto-dependent pattern and limit the alternatives, our transportation policy further exacerbates this phenomenon. Large U.S. metropolitan areas exhibit a wide range of use of the automobile, from 15.9 daily vehicle-miles traveled (VMT) per capita in New York-Newark to 39.2 in Houston. The factor that explains this range more than any other? The highway system, specifically the number of freeway lane-miles per capita.

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The more freeway-intensive our metropolitan regions, the farther people drive to reach their destinations within them. The implication is that congested cities relatively low on the freeway intensity scale could expand their freeway system—but in the process of becoming richer in freeways, they will probably increase their VMT as well. Much of the added capacity will end up going to more automotive travel rather than just faster travel.

What Can Be Done at the Local Level?

To harness the transportation-land use relationship productively, municipalities can reexamine their land-use regulations to determine whether the environments that they create support walking, biking, transit, and short-distance car travel. Where regulations are excluding or limiting development from close-in areas with reasonable transportation accessibility (including automotive) the regulations can be updated to ensure that both their land-use regulations (see www.smartgrowth.org/pdf/gettosg.pdf) and their transportation standards (see www.completestreets.org/) support transportation alternatives.

<p>Property-Based Systems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessing Tax Assessment Delinquent Personal Property Special Assessments P.R.E. Audit Building Department <p>Fund Accounting Systems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> General Ledger/Budgeting Accounts Payable Cash Receipting Miscellaneous Receivables Fixed Assets Purchase Orders Payroll Timesheets Human Resources Utility Billing <p>Companion Systems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Animal Licensing Cemetery Management Business Licensing Complaint Tracking Internet Services 	<p>Software Service Support</p> <p>BS&A continues to be the leader in municipal software development across the state of Michigan. With advancing technology, we strive to keep our customers on the leading edge. Our newest version, Equalizer .Net, is proving to do just that.</p> <p>Applications will be released throughout 2009.</p> <p>Contact us for more details</p>  <p>www.bsasoftware.com</p>
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As most people involved with municipal government know, local constituencies can be resistant to change, and education can go a long way towards opening up new possibilities for transportation and land use. The publications referred to above have many excellent examples that can be used to demonstrate success in a range of locales.


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San Francisco Prioritizes Transit-Friendly Areas for New Stations

Farther-reaching policy reform often involves higher levels of government. In some cases, the issue is changing the incentive structures that municipalities face. For example, the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system in the San Francisco area gives municipalities with transit-friendly land-use plans higher priority for new stations than those whose zoning precludes the development of transit-supportive land uses. The most ambitious approaches go beyond incentives to include sharing of land-use responsibility between local and regional governments.

The Chicken or the Egg

The transportation and land-use issue is sometimes referred to as a chicken-or-the-egg problem: you can't have transit-supportive land use without transit, but you can't have effective transit without transit-supportive land uses. But sensible land-use planning can break out of this cycle. Requirements for low-density, land-use separated development can be relaxed even where public transportation is scarce or absent. Where these land-use reforms lead to more compact, mixed-use environments, they can begin to support walking and cycling. And, even when they end up swapping a short-hop car trip for a long-distance one, they can increase people's effective range of choice in transportation and land use.

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Sound Off!

What do Michigan leaders think about transit?

A multi-modal transportation system is fundamental to the transformation of Michigan's economy. We've been underinvesting in our transportation system for decades. Designing, building and expanding our transportation system will bring jobs, immediately. The 21st century worker, tourist, and business leader all require options for local and regional travel beyond a grid of roadways. If Michigan is to attract and maintain knowledge workers and baby-boomers, we must think beyond the family auto.

-- Robin Beltramini, Troy council member and League president

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