

COMMENTARY

Smart planning, transit can help cool global warming

By David Gardiner
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NASA reports that 2007 was the second warmest year on record, and scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration found that seven of the eight warmest years on record have occurred since 2001. These are sharp reminders that global warming is a critical challenge. Indeed, scientists warn that the world should not warm more than 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit above pre-industrial levels, and that it's already 1.4 degrees warmer since then.

In the face of such evidence that the planet is warming at a dangerous rate, we must identify and quickly put into practice global warming solutions in as many places as possible.

Luckily, practical, proven solutions are available now. One is mass transit coupled with smarter community design.

More than 40 percent of California's greenhouse gas emissions come from transportation. Consequently, transit-oriented development – designing communities that are accessible to public transportation and that encourage walking and bicycling instead of driving – is one way to make significant emissions

cuts.

According to the American Public Transportation Association, a single commuter taking public transit to work instead of driving reduces carbon dioxide by 4,800 pounds a year – far more than would result from switching to compact fluorescent light bulbs or more efficient appliances. And one person in a two-car household switching to public transportation shrinks the household's carbon footprint by 25 to 30 percent.

The fact that reductions on that scale are achievable with familiar tools is good news for California given that the governor and Legislature committed the state to reduce greenhouse gas emissions 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050. Implemented properly, smart growth and expanded public transit can help California reach that goal.

Transit-oriented development not only reduces greenhouse gas emissions, it creates better communities. The Sacramento Area Council of Governments recently finished the Blueprint, its nationally recognized planning process, which found that a commitment today to smart growth and public transit will yield shorter commutes, less congestion, housing growth, more jobs through reinvestment in the city's urban areas and

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more green space. Without smart growth and better mass transit, the average household will spend half an hour more in their vehicles every day, and residents will face dirtier air, longer commutes and more sprawl.

Given its potential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and provide other benefits, transit-oriented development

is one essential solution to climate change. But for it to be an effective tool, we must take two steps.

First, state and local governments must measure the greenhouse gas and global warming impacts of transportation projects so the carbon footprint of the projects is considered like any other environmental or economic factor is. Today, this consideration is the exception, not the rule.

Second, our national and state governments need to guarantee increased funding for public transit. Without this commitment, the 14 percent reduction in carbon dioxide and particulate emissions in Sacramento's Blueprint becomes impossible.

This commitment will be a challenge. Even California, a leader on climate issues, has struggled. The 2007-08 budget redirected more than \$1.2 billion allocated for transit to other purposes. Given the enormity of the climate change threat, this challenge must be overcome.

There are positive developments. Led by its chair, Sen. Barbara Boxer, the Environment and Public Works committee approved landmark climate legislation which substantially increased funding for public transit. While it is unclear if

that legislation will make it to the president's desk, more funding for transit would allow plans like Sacramento's to become reality. Other policymakers, national and local alike, should join Boxer to ensure that transit-oriented development can achieve its promise as a centerpiece of this country's answer to climate change.

Global warming reports send a clear message: Every country in the world must respond to climate change. Some parts of that response will be easier, some harder, but we must respond. Mass transit and land-use planning provide a proven, familiar tool that can reduce greenhouse gases while creating more livable communities. We must seize that opportunity.

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