



Commute traffic on El Dorado Hills Boulevard

DO ROADS CAUSE SPRAWL?

In the December Bulletin, we examined the rapid decentralization that is creating so-called “exurb” communities like El Dorado Hills, a population living in the space between suburban and rural that does not work in cities, does not commute to cities, go to the movies in cities, or have much, if any, contact with urban life. We seem to have broken free of the gravitational pull of the cities, and now exist in our own world far beyond. We wonder if this world is sustainable, if this what we want, and whether there are there any alternatives.

As Winston Churchill once said, we shape our buildings and then our buildings shape us. The same can be said about communities, and today’s concern, all across America, is that we’re still shaping communities and, in turn, they are shaping us. In cities, people worry about schools, jobs, safety, and just keeping services functioning as middle-class taxpayers flee. In suburbs, commuters live by radio traffic reports and bemoan the loss of open space—and, increasingly, the loss of neighbors who depart, seeking a “livable” community somewhere else. In the exurbs, the explosive construction of homes, roads, and schools may overwhelm farms and ranches, often replicating the problems that migrating families tried to escape.

The current building boom—including a million-plus new houses a year—and attendant growth pains have drawn unprecedented national attention to how we are building communities and how they’re shaping us. Under this scrutiny, there has been widespread agreement that growth problems and pains in urban, suburban, and rural areas share a common denominator, which they call “sprawl.”

Many specialists who have studied this issue talk about sprawl as a kind of centrifugal

force. It continually spins resources and residents from urban centers to urban fringes, from urban fringes to nearby suburbs, from nearby suburbs to outlying exurbs, from outlying exurbs to ever-distant rural developments. It’s apparently a never-ending cycle, churning communities in urban, suburban, and rural areas. The perception is that communities are built up and, within a few decades, are seemingly thrown away.

At the same time, there is far less agreement about the best approach to taming the causes of sprawl, causes which include a controversial mix of consumer preferences, real estate profits, and public policies that affect everything from air pollution to school and road construction, to sewer and water services, to zoning.

Also, public discussion is muddled by lack of agreement on what really constitutes sprawl. People use the word pejoratively to describe what they personally don’t like in the American landscape; so one person’s sprawl may be another’s home-sweet-home. In common usage, though, sprawl generally refers to such things as ugly strip malls, big-box superstores, congested roads, and residential construction in rural areas far from public services. Some people see evidence of sprawl in every type of community, including cities; others say the primary problem is

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Evening traffic on Highway 50

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suburbia itself.

Some people claim that rather than reducing congestion, new road capacity actually “causes” sprawl. But ask traffic engineers, and they will assure you that many things cause sprawl, and roads are not necessarily one of them. Everyone agrees that highways built to get people between places quickly turn into places of their own. The question is, who or what is responsible?

Transportation planners seem to put all the blame on the planning commissions, but this misses the point that if so-called sprawl is stopped in one place, the free market will cause it to show up somewhere else.

Now according to the Sierra Club, roads do lead to sprawl, and sprawling development leads to more driving, and so on. They claim that new roads rarely relieve congestion, and in many cases actually make things worse, and that investing in public transportation will ease traffic, improve air and water quality, and is more cost-effective than building new roads. A lot of folks think it’s politically correct these days to bandy about words like “transit” and “smart growth” as if anything that will get other people off the roads is better for you.

However, it’s one thing to say “transit” and “smart growth,” and it’s quite another thing to stop sprawl. Until land use planning promotes transportation choices, stopping sprawl in one location will usually cause it to appear in somewhere else.

So the technical answer to the question “Do roads create sprawl?” is “No, the free market creates sprawl.” The ability of people to buy a nice house in a decent community free of the problems they faced in their old house, brings people to El Dorado Hills.

The convenience of the automobile, and generous federal road building campaigns, have removed many of the spatial constraints that formed the compact urban development of our older communities like San Jose. This freedom has allowed us to expand across the landscape in the form of subdivisions, shopping centers, and industrial parks.

Ever since the mid-1970s, suburban growth in nearly all forms has frequently been equated to sprawl. When new subdivisions or major road projects are proposed, suburban growth is often portrayed as an evil, consuming force, which must be fought and stopped in its tracks wherever it rears its ugly head.

Anti-growth activists tell anyone who will listen that (a) growth and sprawl are expensive drains on capital budgets and tax dollars; (b) growth and sprawl are inherently harmful to the environment; (c) growth needs to be confined to developed areas already served by public facilities and mass transit, and (4) growth and sprawl consume land and spoil natural landscapes. Against this pervasive prejudice in the land planning profession, one may offer a simple, contrarian message: It isn’t necessarily so!

This is not to say that the antigrowth activists are wrong. As frequently practiced and implemented, all of these alleged evils attributed to suburban growth can be found and do indeed occur. But these unfortunate consequences do not always occur, and with good planning and land use policies, they don’t have to happen.

Low-density suburban development is often portrayed as representing a drain on the public treasury. In fact, low density housing can provide a net benefit to the general fund, and pay its own fair share of school and other capital facilities costs.

The large home is typically a premium product, with a premium price tag and a commensurate tax bill. It appeals to families who can afford it. Many are owned by persons that are older and further along in their career cycles. This means substantial real estate taxes are generated, with very little demand per household on social services, public recreation amenities, or public safety operations.

Many town and county governments have also adopted schedules of impact fees through which the subdivision developer, and ultimately the home buyer, pays into a fund earmarked for school construction, libraries, roads and other new public facilities.

Dispersed, low density development is often said to be harmful to the environment. The argument is made that this pattern of growth spreads air pollution as a result of more commuters and increased automobile trips. Anti-growth arguments are often heard to the effect that land use policies should limit growth to areas served by mass transit, and encourage higher density developments within these areas to make public transit more economically viable. With greater public transit use, the reasoning goes, air pollution generated by cars would be reduced.

In theory, this limitation of growth might appear to be good land use policy. But does this approach really reduce pollutants in the air? Modern automobiles, particularly the small-to-mid-sized vehicles preferred by

single driver commuters, generate less pollution than was the case just ten years ago. The amount of pollution given off by a late model car running at 30 to 50 miles an hour over low traffic roads is very, very small. Consider this the next time you are driving behind a bus. Watch the cloud of dense, oily smoke expanding into the air you’re about to breathe with every acceleration it makes. Can this really be less pollution than generated by one- and two-passenger cars carrying the same number of people?

A dispersed development pattern can spread out trip origins and destinations, reducing the frequency of traffic jams. Dispersion can also avoid “hot spots” and spikes which might violate federal air quality standards. On the other hand, concentrated development may cause more environmental problems than a marginal increase in public transit usage can solve.

Another policy often advocated is to focus development into areas already served by existing public facilities (infilling). In general, this makes fiscal sense. But again, there are limits and exceptions. There is an assumption that developed areas have unused capacity in the public facilities which can serve additional infill development. Think for a moment of an urbanized area, with sidewalks directly abutting the street, and buildings edged directly on the sidewalk. What is the cost of widening the street here, as opposed to widening a two-lane highway in El Dorado Hills? Can the urban street widening even be done? In a heavily developed area, what does it cost to upgrade a 12-inch water main to an 18-inch line, including the night construction and overtime to avoid crippling traffic delays while the streets are torn-up? Is this really more cost-effective than running 6-inch lines alongside a country road with no construction obstacles? Which is more easily fixed if it springs a leak? Which repair job causes the least disruption? What about cultural facilities, parks, and libraries? A dispersed development pattern can be served with smaller facilities on smaller sites, with lower overall costs.

If already urbanized areas have excess capacity, then costs for providing these facilities can be avoided by focusing development towards these areas. But at some point the available capacity will be consumed, and new facilities or expansions needed. With a more concentrated service population, you will then need larger facilities in larger buildings on larger sites.

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The one complaint made against dispersed development that is obviously true is that it does consume more land. Which land is developed, and which land is left in "natural" or rural state, can be a matter of conscious policy rather than random market forces. Describing development as a force that "consumes" land does not tell the whole story, however. This act of consumption frequently means that private, inaccessible lands, often held fallow without crops or tree cover, are converted into attractive and vibrant neighborhoods. This is not always a bad thing. And, with current state-of-art land planning, parks, recreational facilities, nature trails, and open spaces are typically included in larger, planned subdivisions. This is not the old slash and bulldoze, all-in-a-row tract housing of the 1950s.

Community planning and development today is extraordinarily sensitive to the natural amenities and aesthetics of the land as a result of developers' enlightened self-interest. Such an approach adds value to the finished product. Yes, an old rustic farm can have a certain charm, but an attractive, landscaped neighborhood street can be stunning. The "consumption" of land for such purposes can in some cases make the land more truly green than it ever was in its natural, undeveloped state.

From all of these observations, one could suggest that all low-density, dispersed development is a good thing. To the contrary, there are ample examples of unwisely located, poorly planned developments with minimal amenities, which have cost far more taxes than ever generated by the new development. But today these can be increasingly the exception, not the rule. Perhaps it's time to stop chanting the anti-sprawl mantra, and recognize that with quality planning and appropriate local policies in place, low density, dispersed development like El Dorado Hills can make sense.

While we see that roads do not necessarily cause sprawl, does sprawl cause traffic congestion? Does unbridled development without sufficient roadway construction choke traffic? This contentious issue will be discussed in a future Bulletin. ~

THE PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Hello Everyone,

I hope that you and your pets and plants survived the cold snap we had last month. January is supposed to be cold, but that frigid spell was ridiculous. I think Fran and I may have lost a few plants in the yard, but that's all, and we will wait until spring to see if they come back.

As it was, we had plenty to do in the yard, as our plants are growing mature, which means there is that much more to trim and prune. So we got another green waste bin to hold it all. Since it was so cool, we certainly didn't work up a sweat working in the yard last month.

Our friend Louis came over during the holidays and gave us a lesson in how to prune our grape vines. I ended up with a big pile of cuttings, but I was able to put my chipper to work, and it only took a day or so to chip the pile into mulch. Now the vineyard looks so bare, with just what's left of all that summer growth reduced to a T formation on the trellises.

This month's Bulletin has a feature story that is a bit longer than we usually run, but the extra space was needed to fully explain the subject: the relationship of roads to sprawl. The approach taken by the story is, I hope, even-handed. What we are looking for are facts, not anecdotes. Future stories will cover other factors that contribute to the well-being or detriment of any community, especially a growing one like ours.

John E. Thomson

President



Happy Valentine's Day

**R.J. LEE REPORT REFUTED BY FEDS: EDH FIBERS ARE ASBESTOS**

Last year, a geological report prepared by the firm of R.J. Lee at the behest of local businesses and touted by county School Superintendent Vicki Barber alleged that the fibers found in some El Dorado Hills neighborhoods and schools were not asbestos at all, and so were of no threat to the community. The R.J. Lee firm has a history of arguing that fibers are not asbestos, but several years ago a similar report was rejected by a federal court in the litigation surrounding the asbestos mining scandal in Libby, Montana.

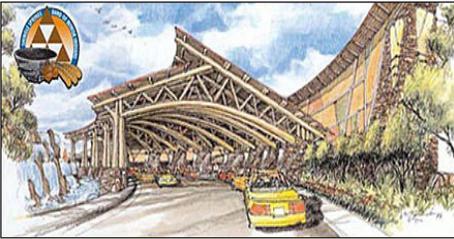
Though Superintendent Barber has stopped short of endorsing the industry view, she has said in the past that it reinforced doubts that she and other local officials harbored over the reliability of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) asbestos testing.

However, in December 2007 the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) confirmed the findings of the federal EPA that a particularly dangerous kind of asbestos exists on playgrounds, and most likely in some neighborhoods, in El Dorado Hills.

USGS mineralogists, experts in mineral identification, reached the conclusion after closely examining the study samples of tiny particles that the mining industry asserted were not asbestos.

The USGS investigation found that while most of those particles did not conform to the traditional commercial definition of asbestos, as R.J. Lee argued, the microscopic bits of minerals nonetheless were within scientists' widely accepted range of sizes, shapes and chemical compositions counted as "asbestos" for health studies. The USGS investigators also said that asbestos health experts, not the mining industry or mineralogists, need to take the lead in redefining asbestos from a health perspective. "Ultimately, it is the health community that must determine what particle types are significant with respect to asbestos-related diseases," the report stated.

Local resident Chris Anaya said he "was pleased with the USGS report," and that he hoped remediation could move forward. ~



Artist's concept of new casino

MIWOK TRIBE COURTS PUBLIC ON CASINO

On January 30, members from the Tribal Council of the Shingle Springs Rancheria conducted the first of several public meetings intended to garner a positive response from the community to the proposed Foothill Oaks Casino. More than 50 local residents attended the presentation at the El Dorado Hills Public Library. Art boards showing concepts of the interior and exterior architecture, the gaming areas, and the dining facilities, which will include at least one four-star restaurant, greeted attendees.

Elaine Whitehurst, a Tribal Council Member, showed artist's conceptions of the Highway 50 interchange that will lead into the casino. There will be a fly-over ramp with its own lane into the Rancheria grounds. She explained how this interchange would finally give the Indians direct access to their Rancheria, which has been denied them since the 1965 realignment of U.S. Highway 50 turned the Rancheria into an island.

Ms. Whitehurst detailed the benefits that the casino would bring to the local community, including paying for new HOV lanes on Highway 50, providing money for increased public safety, \$40-60 million in new revenue for local business annually, a \$190 million agreement between El Dorado County and the Shingle Springs Tribe, and 1,500 new local jobs.

Residents asked a variety of questions such as what the casino designers are doing to keep the eating areas smoke-free, how the Rancheria planned to remove rattlesnakes, which are apparently plentiful in Shingle Springs, and whether any Nevada casinos are involved in the building of the casino. Ray Meyers, an El Dorado Hills resident pointed out the moral hazards when casinos enter an area, such as gambling addiction, a high suicide rate among casino visitors, increase in crime, a negative influence on the young, etc. He asked how the Miwok Tribal Council planned to counter such negative influences.

Ms. Whitehurst said that the Miwoks are aware of the social issues involved in the in-

troduction of casinos into communities. She said that their Tribal Council is researching how other casinos have successfully handled such issues and will be taking proactive steps to address them.

Another community meeting will be held by the Shingle Springs Rancheria on Monday, February 12, from 7:00 PM – 9 PM at the Veterans Hall at the El Dorado County Fairgrounds in Placerville. ~



BASS LAKE HOV LANES HIT THE ON-RAMP

Momentum is building for the construction of high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes on both sides of Highway 50 between El Dorado Hills Boulevard and Bass Lake Road. Both the county and state departments of transportation are backing a proposal to garner \$20 million in road building money for the project from the new Proposition 1B anti-gridlock fund that was approved by voters in November. The county has earmarked an additional \$9 million as its share of construction costs.

The project calls for adding the HOV lanes to the stretch of Highway 50 from El Dorado Hills Boulevard to the vicinity of Bass Lake Road, and will first require the widening of the existing freeway overpasses to accommodate the new lanes, according to county department of transportation (DOT) assistant director Russ Nygaard. Overpasses that

need to be improved as part of this project are the ones at El Dorado Hills Boulevard, Silva Valley, and Bass Lake Road.

For the county, the El Dorado Hills-Bass Lake Road high-occupancy vehicle lane project is the first part of a three-phase plan that contemplates adding HOV lanes on U.S. 50 from the Sacramento County line to a point beyond Shingle Springs, to near the planned freeway interchange that will serve the new Foothill Oaks casino.

If the state money is forthcoming, a construction contract for the El Dorado Hills Boulevard-Bass Lake Road phase could be awarded in mid- to late 2007, according to Nygaard. A final completion date of all phases of the total project will depend on funding and weather conditions.

A copy of the Environmental Assessment and Negative Declaration for the project may be accessed on the Bass Lake Action website. ~

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