

# How Planning Can Combat Climate Change in Southern California

William Fulton



Conventional wisdom would suggest that Southern California is ill-prepared for the twin challenges of peak oil and climate change. After all, we are the most sprawling, car-oriented place on earth, right? We are so addicted to our automobiles that we simply cannot live without our fix of driving, and this will doom our efforts to attack the question of climate change and respond to the problem of peak oil. Right?

Not exactly. It is true that Southern California, like most metropolitan areas in the Western United States, is mostly auto oriented. We have built vast stretches of single-family homes across the landscape, and in large parts of the region it is almost impossible to get around without a car. But as a society, Southern California is surprisingly efficient. On a per-capita basis, both our vehicle miles traveled and the associated transportation energy consumption are low compared to the rest of the country.<sup>1</sup> That is because, by and large, although we have to drive to get from one place to another, those places are not very far apart, particularly in the Los Angeles and Orange counties portion of the region.

Clearly, in the era of peak oil and climate change, we have to do better. But this does not mean that we have to force the creation of a dense urban society that nobody wants. Rather, what it means is that we have to take maximum advantage of the emerging pockets of urban concentration that we see throughout the region. We need to focus as much of our public policy as possible on reinforcing those concentrated areas so that they function as efficiently as any urban location on earth.



Despite our international reputation as a capital of sprawl, most of Southern California actually is not sprawling today. That is because we have few places left to sprawl to. Most of Los Angeles and Orange counties are built-out, with very little raw land left. Ventura County has made a policy choice to retain farmland and, in so doing, is driving new development into existing cities. Riverside and San Bernardino counties are still building out on raw land, but increasingly they are facing constraints, both from environmental protection and the realities of traffic congestion.

The result of these current development patterns, to be sure, is ever-more traffic congestion in a lot of places. The sheer amount of traffic on the region's freeways is overwhelming, even though most drivers are not going

a long distance; and traffic on surface streets is considerable, especially in affluent communities where more people have cars and more jobs are concentrated. But hidden within this problem is opportunity – the opportunity to reshape certain parts of the region to be less dependent on automobiles and therefore respond to the challenges of both peak oil and climate change.

Despite its reputation as a sprawling and low-density region, Southern California has always had more than its share of self-contained villages and dense communities. The original Red Car system linked together a far-flung network of villages from Santa Monica to San Bernardino, all of which contained jobs and houses and retail in close proximity to one another. The central part of Los Angeles has always been a dense concentration of urban activity; before the opening of the Red Line, the Wilshire Corridor was the busiest bus-only corridor in the nation. And Southern California has always had high-density centers of single activities, including apartment complexes throughout the San Fernando Valley and Orange County; office centers such as Warner Center in Woodland Hills and Century City in West Los Angeles; and shopping centers such as South Coast Plaza in Orange County.

Today, the trick is to reinforce these villages and centers so that they have more jobs and housing and shopping in close proximity to one another; and – to the extent possible – knit these locations together with high-speed public transit in the form of rail lines and “bus rapid transit” like the Orange Line across the San Fernando Valley. Only by doing this will our region move beyond the current situation – auto-efficient but still auto-dependent – to a situation where we actually begin to reduce overall driving, reduce the use of gasoline, and reduce greenhouse-gas emissions.

Southern California already has the tools in place to accomplish these goals. Over the past decade, a wide variety of policy efforts – including SCAG’s Compass/Blueprint program – have identified villages and centers best suited to accommodate more development, along with market opportunities, policy ideas, and funding sources that can be brought together to both create and strengthen locations that are less dependent on the car. In Los Angeles County, new development along the Red Line and the Gold Line especially have shown the way. North Hollywood, for example, has blossomed into a walkable urban community with a thriving arts scene. Meanwhile, transit-oriented development has sprung up along the Gold Line all the way from downtown Los Angeles to Pasadena.

In outlying counties, similar concentrations of development have occurred along Metrolink lines and in centralized locations that are parking-rich, thus permitting localities to adopt a “Park Once” strategy. Concentrated development is planned near the Fullerton Metrolink station in Orange County, for example; and even Simi Valley in Ventura County has built high-density housing adjacent to Metrolink. In places like Victoria Gardens in Rancho Cucamonga and Valencia Town Center in Santa Clarita, we are seeing construction of urban housing adjacent to jobs and shopping in areas formerly viewed as exclusively suburban. Residents may still drive to work, but they do not have to drive much of anyplace else – especially for shopping and entertainment, which is just a short stroll away.

Southern California is blessed with dozens of these emerging mixed-use villages containing a dense concentration of activities. Some date back to the 19th Century, when the rail lines were first laid out. Others are prewar downtowns. Still others, like Victoria Gardens and Valencia Town Center, have essentially been created out of nothing in recent years. In a few cases,

such as The Americana At Brand in Glendale, the new town center concept has been plugged into an old downtown area.

Just as successfully reducing our carbon footprint requires a concentration of activities in close proximity to one another, successfully bringing these communities into existence requires a dense and focused concentration of policy, funding, and marketing efforts.

There is no question, for example, that our region has an increasingly large market for more urban living. This market stretches across virtually all demographic and income groups. Young professionals and empty-nesters alike want to live a hassle-free life where they have minimal reliance on the car – but maximum access to entertainment and recreation. Working-class families increasingly prefer to live in small-lot single-family houses near their families, neighborhoods, and churches – rather than moving 40, 60, 80 miles away for a new house. And increasingly, as well, private real estate capital is gravitating toward these markets, targeting specific zip codes or income groups.

Just as important, however, is the fact that public funding sources are reinforcing these new, more concentrated communities as well. In 2006, for example, California voters adopted Proposition 1C – a housing bond that allocated more than \$1 billion for infill and transit-oriented development projects. Many major mixed-use projects in infill locations and adjacent to transit stops are now being funded partly by this money.

Increasingly as well, public policy is shifting in this direction too. The recent adoption of SB 375 is perhaps the best example. This state law – designed to draw transportation and land use closer together in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions – creates powerful new incentives for

regional planning agencies like SCAG to give preference to development projects located in these concentrated locations, especially those near transit stops. Under SB 375, SCAG will build on the Compass/Blueprint program to create a “Sustainable Communities Strategy” – and projects that conform to that strategy will qualify for streamlined review under the California Environmental Quality Act.

There is still a lot of resistance throughout the region to the idea of concentrated development in villages and centers. Many longtime residents fear that their quality of life – traditionally suburban in nature – will be compromised by these changes. In addition, inner-city activists focused on environmental justice issues fear that their communities will be disproportionately affected as well.

These are legitimate concerns. But even for these longtime residents, scattershot development is likely to compromise their quality of life as well. Overall traffic congestion will be worse. Rather than being concentrated in existing villages and centers, new high-rise development could spring up randomly in their communities. And, of course, longtime residents as well will have to drive more in slower traffic, consume more oil, and emit more greenhouse gases.

It is hard to know whether we have hit peak oil yet, but it is coming soon. And the climate change crisis is already here. These two crises – on top of important other trends, such as transit construction, a lack of land, and the increasing cost of a suburban lifestyle – are likely to push Southern California strongly in a new direction in the decades ahead.

## Endnote

1. In 2005, the vehicle miles traveled (VMT) per capita in the SCAG region were approximately 8,770 compared to 10,083 for the national average. This is mainly due to the much lower VMT per capita from Los Angeles and Orange counties at 7,672. VMT per capita in Riverside and San Bernardino counties, however, exceeded the national average in 2005. Please refer to Frank Southworth, Anton Sonnenberg, and Marilyn Brown, “*The Transportation Energy and Carbon Footprints of the 100 Largest U.S. Metropolitan Areas*” Working Paper 37 (Georgia Institute of Technology School of Public Policy, 2008).

## About the Author

William Fulton is Deputy Mayor of Ventura and a Principal in the planning consulting firm of Design, Community & Environment. He is the author of several books including *Guide to California Planning* and *The Reluctant Metropolis*. Mr. Fulton is also Publisher of *California Planning & Development* report and a Senior Scholar at the School of Policy, Planning & Development at the University of Southern California. He has spoken on growth and planning trends to groups throughout the United States.