

Housing preferences for 'green' commuters stir debate

A few places in California have started experimenting with "traffic-reducing housing" — residences that are made available first, or at lower cost, to people who work nearby or who pledge to commute by other means than private vehicles.

In Redwood City, south of San Francisco, Paul Powers is asking permission to build Peninsula Park, a development that would include 800 condominium units that would be sold first to people who work within four miles and who promise to walk, bike, or ride mass transit to work.

Steve Raney, a Palo Alto-based transportation consultant affiliated with the nonprofit organization Cities21, says the traffic-reducing housing concept has already been applied in a development on Stanford University land and in publicly subsidized housing in downtown Santa Barbara.

- For 628 apartments at Stanford West, the university gives priority to local workers who have very short commutes. Tenants with "green" commutes — either very short distances to work, or commutes by other means than private cars — receive a 10 percent discount on their monthly rent. Raney says this policy saves 2.6 million vehicle miles per year.

- For 42 affordable units of infill development in downtown Santa Barbara, the city's Housing Authority limits tenancy to people who work downtown or within walking distance. Preference is given to those who do not own a vehicle and who agree not to acquire one during their occupancy. The housing complex, called Casa de Las Fuentes, has only 20 cars, according to Raney.

- If approved, the Redwood City project would be the first market-rate condominium development employing the concept of traffic-reducing housing, Raney says. He points out that 85,000 jobs are within three miles of the project site, and downtown Redwood City has a Caltrain commuter rail station. The Peninsula Park project is planned to have a 0.8-mile bike path to downtown and a 1.4-mile shuttle bus route to downtown.

- Raney is campaigning for such housing preferences by arguing that they would cut vehicle miles, gasoline consumption, and particulate and green-

house emissions, along with reducing the pressure to expand the region. Areas with severe congestion or a jobs/housing imbalance would benefit especially, he says. Raney says this is more effective at reducing automobile commuting than is transit-oriented development.

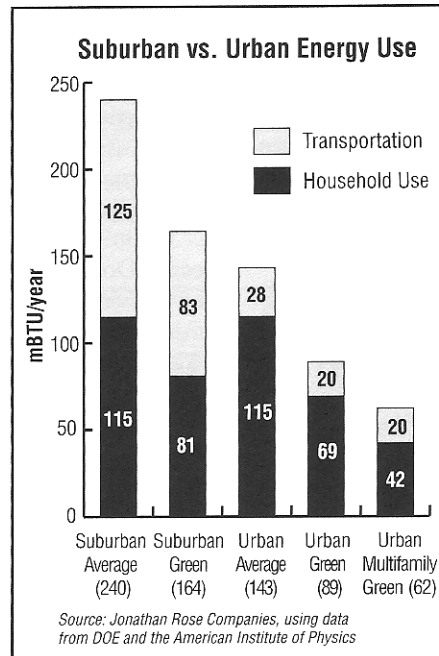
If widely applied, however, the concept could restrict people's housing choices and undermine the logic of liv-

ing in a metropolitan area. One of the reasons people live in a metro area is to gain access to the jobs, education, and amenities of a sizable region, not just a small part of it.

TROUBLING ISSUES

"It's not necessarily a bad idea, but it raises some troubling issues," says Jeffrey Tumlin, a principal at Nelson/Nygaard transportation consultants in San Francisco. Although traffic-reducing housing would reduce auto trip distances to work, Tumlin notes that "commute trips are only 20 percent of total trips," so shortening the commute distances would leave much car travel unchanged. He argues that more substantial reductions in automobile use can be accomplished through "parking policy, transit improvements, density, and other land use programs." Making the true cost of parking noticeable to motorists would "be perceived as less intrusive by those who don't want government telling them what to do," he adds. Tumlin suggests that governments should remove obstacles that prevent employers from creating housing for their workers, especially in low-density suburban office parks.

For more on the perspective of Cities21, see www.cities21.org. ♦



Want to cut vehicle travel? Bring jobs and housing together

With some exceptions, such as Peter Calthorpe's work, new urbanists have focused more of their attention on integrating retail into residential areas than on creating what policy specialists call a "jobs/housing balance." A new study by Robert Cervero and Michael Duncan suggests that the jobs/housing balance is in fact the more important of these goals — if what's desired is a reduction in vehicular travel.

In the Autumn 2006 *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Cervero, a transportation planning specialist at UC-Berkeley, and Duncan, a doctoral candidate in Berkeley's planning program, say both goals are worthwhile. Previous research "found that locating retail stores and services near residences can 'de-generate' vehicular trips for

shopping by upwards of 25 percent," the authors write.

The new analysis by Cervero and Duncan says that if twice as much retail and service activity is placed within four miles of people's residences, there will be a 13.7 percent decline in the time spent getting to and from shops and consumer services. That's a step in the right direction, so to speak, but it doesn't accomplish as much as bringing a large number of jobs near people's homes. The authors say that "access to jobs reduces personal time spent in travel by vehicle nearly 88 percent more than access to shopping and services." Easier access to jobs reduces vehicle miles of travel 72.5 percent more than does access to shopping and services.

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