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Livable Communities: Creating Safe and Livable Neighborhoods, Towns, and Regions in California

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**Livable Communities:**  
*Creating Safe and Livable Neighborhoods,  
Towns, and Regions in California*

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University of California at Berkeley  
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# **Livable Communities:**

## **Creating Safe and Livable Neighborhoods, Towns, and Regions in California**

Stephen M. Wheeler

### **Executive Summary**

Community livability is of increasing concern to many Californians as growth-related problems mount. This paper addresses key threats to the livability of the state's communities and outlines potential policy responses.

A "livable" neighborhood can be defined as one that is "pleasant, safe, affordable, and supportive of human community." Key elements of community livability often include an attractive, pedestrian-oriented public realm; low traffic speed, volume, and congestion; decent, affordable, and well-located housing; convenient schools, shops, and services; accessible parks and open space; a clean natural environment; places that feel safe and accepting to a diverse range of users; the presence of meaningful cultural, historical, and ecological features; and friendly, community-oriented social environments.

California faces many threats to the future livability of its communities. Particular problem areas include the following:

1. Rapid population growth. Combined with resource-intensive lifestyles, the state's population boom threatens environmental quality, transportation systems, open space, community resources such as parks and schools, and local governments' ability to provide services. Rather than focusing on limiting immigration, the most constructive response may consist of programs to reduce family size within the state, to promote compact development within existing urbanized areas, and to reduce consumption of nonrenewable resources and generation of waste.
2. Rising traffic congestion. Continued increase in per capita vehicle miles traveled in the state is not sustainable, and growing traffic volumes and congestion undermine the livability of California communities. The only way to address the problem is to undertake initiatives in three interrelated areas. First, compact and mixed-use land use patterns can reduce the

amount of driving and can facilitate travel by alternate modes. Second, improved pedestrian, bicycle, and public transit facilities can provide alternatives to driving. Third, pricing incentives such as parking charges and reduced-price transit passes can encourage residents to use their cars less.

3. Loss of farmland, open space, and ecological habitats. Suburban sprawl threatens huge amounts of California's farmland and open space. These problems can be addressed by compact development policies, including Urban Growth Boundaries and Smart Growth policies, to promote infill development within the boundaries. For such local efforts to be most effective, however, California needs a framework of statewide growth management goals implemented through a carefully coordinated system of incentives, rewards, and mandates for regional and local action.
4. Real or perceived problems of safety within communities. Although crime rates are declining in California, concerns about safety motivate many residents to move to fringe suburban areas. Ways to address safety concerns include repopulating urban areas to put people on the street at all hours, adding design features that increase "eyes on the street," and building mixed-income housing to avoid concentrations of poverty that may lead to crime.
5. Growing inequities within metropolitan areas. Income and tax base disparities between traditional California communities—downtowns and older residential neighborhoods—and newly built suburbs are increasing. One way to address this problem is through regional revenue sharing, which has been operating in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area since 1972. Overhauling the state's tax structure to eliminate the tax base disparities created by Proposition 13 should also be made a priority.
6. Loss of community identity and a "sense of place. landscape is becoming an increasingly homogenous "geography of nowhere." The antidote is to emphasize the unique historic, cultural, and ecological features of each community and to develop design guidelines and review processes that ensure development which enhances these unique characteristics.
7. Deficiencies of affordable housing. The lack of decent, well-located, affordable housing in many parts of the state is a quiet crisis affecting the lives of millions of residents. Stronger

inclusionary housing requirements, enforcement of “fair share” housing goals, and expanded support for nonprofit housing providers can help meet the housing challenge.

8. A lack of locally-oriented businesses, shops, and jobs in many communities. As chain stores and malls have spread, traditional neighborhood centers and downtowns have suffered, and Californians must drive growing distances to do daily shopping. Mixed-use land development—placing stores in community centers near housing and jobs—can help address these problems. Restrictions on construction of chain stores, big-box retailers, and regional malls can also help preserve local businesses. Fiscal reform can eliminate incentives for local government to chase “high rateables” which provide large sales tax revenues.
9. Threats to environmental quality. Californians care deeply about a healthy environment. Air and water pollution, toxic chemicals, nonrenewable resource consumption, and loss of ecosystems all threaten the livability and sustainability of the state’s communities. Expanded monitoring and enforcement of existing environmental law, cooperative environmental stewardship processes, restoration of damaged ecosystems, compact land use, and transportation reforms to reduce driving can all help improve the state’s natural environment.
10. The lack of adequate governmental institutions which can effectively manage growth. Neither state, regional, nor local government has been able to address effectively California’s growth-related problems. Stronger institutions and planning mechanisms are needed at all levels. State growth management goals and a state land development and conservation agency can help coordinate future programs. Stronger regional agencies able to address both transportation and land use can help coordinate land use in metropolitan areas. Better area planning and design review by local government is essential to implement detailed, locally-developed plans. To bring about effective local action aimed at “smart growth,” the state’s growth management strategy needs to utilize both incentives and mandates.

Success at preserving or enhancing community livability in California will come only through an integrated, mutually-reinforcing set of policies and incentives at different levels of government. State leadership is essential. Both regulatory and incentive-based approaches—“carrots and sticks”—will be necessary. Perhaps most important is that livability-



oriented planning processes be inclusive and participatory, developing “buy-in” from different constituencies over time and promoting public education and coalition-building which can help achieve long-term results.

## **What is “Community Livability?”**

“Livability” is a word increasingly used to refer to quality-of-life issues important to the long-term well-being of people and communities. The term encompasses issues such as environmental quality, safety, affordability, neighborliness, convenience, and the presence of neighborhood amenities such as parks, open space, sidewalks, restaurants, and neighborhood-serving stores. Together these assets help make places pleasant and easy to live in. The lack of such assets can make life much harder.

Perhaps most important in discussions of livability is the subjective experience of living in particular places. This experience may tell a far different story than that yielded by quantitative data or abstract economic, political, or environmental analyses. The day-to-day experience of “livability” is what attracts or repels people, in many cases, to a state like California.

Livability concerns reflect a natural evolution of planning priorities to meet the needs of a relatively affluent post-industrial society. Such a society places greater emphasis on quality of life and recreational opportunities than did earlier generations (Inglehart, 1990). This emphasis tends to be particularly great among highly skilled workers who have a number of economic opportunities available to them. As industries become more mobile in an age of globalization, both workers and business owners are able to move from state to state in search of this quality of life. Such mobility helps explain the attractiveness of California during the post-war period and now helps explain the appeal of states like Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Nevada to many Californians, who feel that the state’s quality of life is decreasing.

### **Definitions**

No single best definition of “livability” has emerged. Noted urban design theorist Kevin Lynch at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology preferred to think of it in terms of a number of values or performance dimensions, including “vitality,” “sense,” “fit,” “access,” “control,” “efficiency,” and “justice” (Lynch, 1981). These concepts have been influential with urban designers in the 1980s and 1990s.

The Clinton–Gore Administration’s “Livable Communities Initiative” in the late 1990s stated its intention of working with communities “to build futures that sustain prosperity and expand economic opportunity; enhance the quality of life; and build a stronger sense of community.” This initiative contrasted “livable communities” and “smart

growth” with current patterns of suburban sprawl and offered a long list of potential programs to address livability problems. These proposals, most not realized, included Better American Bonds to help communities buy open space, Livable America Indicators, support for existing public transit initiatives, brownfield reclamation efforts, new steps to analyze federal location decisions, and interagency and regional partnerships to improve community livability (Clinton–Gore Administration, 2000).

In California, the Sacramento-based Local Government Commission (LGC) has been a leader in developing livability concepts. In 1992, LGC published a report entitled *Land Use Strategies for More Livable Places* and, more recently, established a Center for Livable Communities. The Center defines its livability agenda as helping local communities to “increase transportation alternatives, reduce infrastructure costs, create more affordable housing, improve air quality, preserve natural resources, and restore local economic and social vitality.”

The California-based authors of *Livable Cities Observed* (1995), Suzanne H. Crowhurst Lennard and Henry L. Lennard, present a more extensive list of livability attributes:

- urban spaces conducive to public life, for sociability and dialogue
- architecture appropriate to the history of the city and region
- an urban tradition which enriches everyday life, with markets and civic community festivals
- traditions that include children in urban planning and community events
- housing policies which do not segregate by income and which combine housing, shops and services
- accessibility through walking, and land use planning policies based on walking
- transportation policies favoring public transportation and the partial taming of the car
- an ecological basis for architecture and urban design
- a city which invests in poetic landmarks that are meaningful for their citizens; public art that is small scale, interactive, and provides amenities

According to Brian Scott, President of Livable Oregon, “A livable community has engaged people and businesses, efficient and memorable places, and community-reinforcing activities” (Scott, 1998).

For the purposes of this report, livability can be defined as “the quality of being pleasant, safe, affordable, and supportive of human community.” Although livability is in large part a subjective concept, enough agreement exists on attributes of livable communities to make this term useful as a guiding philosophy of urban design and to allow the development of livability guidelines for specific types of places.

Important elements contributing to livability in urban areas, condensed from the sources listed above, include the following:

- an attractive, pedestrian-oriented public realm
- low traffic speed, volume, and congestion
- decent, affordable, well-located housing
- convenient schools, shops, and services
- accessible parks and open space
- a clean natural environment
- diverse, legible, and educative built landscapes
- places that feel safe and accepting to all users
- places that emphasize local culture, history, and ecology
- environments that nurture human community and interaction

## History

Livability-oriented activism and urban planning movements have sprung up in recent decades in the US and around the world. A number of California architects, planners, and activists have been in the vanguard of such efforts.

The neighborhood preservation movement launched by Jane Jacobs and others in the 1960s celebrates the sociability and livability of dense, mixed-use urban areas and oft-fought urban renewal programs which proposed to destroy these neighborhoods. In her well-known book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), Jacobs described the vitality of old urban communities such as Greenwich Village in New York and Boston’s North End. She and other activists called for neighborhood residents to be involved in planning and land use, a usual goal of planning to this day.

Also beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, a growing volume of research in environmental design began providing theoretical and empirical foundations for designing for livability. Environmental design researchers look at how people actually use and perceive cities and then often develop this information into design guidelines and recommendations. One pioneer of this movement was William Whyte, known for his studies of how people use urban plazas and other public spaces. At MIT, Kevin Lynch (1960) developed techniques of “cognitive mapping” in which people’s mental images of the city provided a rich source of information to guide future planning and design efforts. More recently, other researchers have investigated how livable streets and pedestrian-friendly boulevards are created (Appleyard, 1981; Jacobs, 1993), how to design people-friendly housing developments and public spaces (Cooper Marcus and Sarkissian, 1986; Cooper Marcus and Francis, 1990), and how various building types affect microclimates within the city (Bosselmann, 1990). Many of these researchers have been based at the University of California, Berkeley. The “good city form” theory of Lynch (1981) has also been very influential in laying out a framework for thinking about urban livability, emphasizing qualities such as legibility, transparency, congruence, diversity, efficiency, and convenience in addition to the design values mentioned previously.

The “silent revolution” of statewide growth management planning processes that began in the mid 1970s seeks to preserve open space in the face of growth, helping provide urban residents with recreational and aesthetic amenities important to livability. Vermont, Oregon, New Jersey, Florida, Washington, Maine and other states have passed legislation with this objective. Implementation has been difficult in most cases, with Oregon and Vermont perhaps achieving the greatest success. Such efforts continue; New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman has made open space preservation a centerpiece of her second administration.

Since the 1970s, a variety of traffic-calming and bicycle planning movements in Europe and the US have sought to improve urban livability by slowing traffic and creating more people-friendly street environments. To calm traffic, Germany and the Netherlands undertook widespread redesign of streets in the late 1970s; by the 1980s, California cities like Berkeley and Davis were experimenting with methods of their own. In the 1990s, pedestrian and bike planning in the US was greatly stimulated by the federal government’s Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA), which made increased funding available. New or expanded public transit systems have also helped improve livability in many US cities in the past several decades by offering residents increased mobility choices.

Since the 1980s, feminist perspectives on urban design have strongly emphasized livability, examining urban environments from the viewpoint of women, children, and the elderly. Feminist critics point out how public spaces, transportation systems, and the spatial layout of metropolitan areas are designed by men with male needs in mind (such as for traditional commuting between a suburban home and central city workplace). The result is that women are often isolated in suburban homes, lack appropriately-sited childcare or healthcare facilities, feel uncomfortable or unsafe in public environments, and spend much of their time chauffeuring children from place to place (e.g., Hayden, 1984).

An influential series of “International Making Cities Livable” conferences was initiated in 1985, and since that time has held more than twenty major events around the world, including many in Europe. The Carmel-based conference organization brings together public officials, academics, and professionals to consider how to improve future quality of life in the world’s cities. Organizers believe that planners must learn from the examples of historic city centers and small towns that have proved over time to be successful and that they must consider how to improve quality of life for urban residents from all classes and social groups (Lennard et al., 1997).

In the 1990s, the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU), headquartered in San Francisco, has become the nation’s most influential urban design movement. CNU members seek to improve community livability in part by recapturing many of the qualities of traditional American cities and towns. New Urbanist communities emphasize compact land use patterns, narrow streets with generous sidewalks, front porches on houses, second units on many lots, proximity to public transportation, and a mixture of land uses including corner stores and village centers. Although early New Urbanist projects—such as Seaside, Florida, and Laguna West near Sacramento—were built on “greenfield” land, New Urbanists have increasingly sought opportunities for “infill” projects in more urban settings. Many founders of the New Urbanism have been involved in crafting manifestos such as the Ahwahnee Principles (intended as “a blueprint for planning more livable places”) and the Charter of the Congress for the New Urbanism. Californians such as Peter Calthorpe, Stefanos Polyzoides and Elizabeth Moule have been among the leaders of this movement.

The “Smart Growth” movement which has emerged since the mid-1990s seeks to promote more compact communities and to halt suburban sprawl, in part, by building infrastructure only in communities with growth management plans in place to ensure that expenditures will be cost-

effective and promote desirable forms of development. The US Environmental Protection Agency has established a Smart Growth Program to assist local governments in adopting such policies, and the State of Maryland has adopted a statewide Smart Growth planning framework which took effect in 1998.

Although coming from different perspectives, these movements all contribute to an understanding of how to make cities and towns more livable, and how to base planning agendas on the experience and input of people who will be using urban environments. The agendas of these movements overlap very substantially, and represent an emerging synthesis of urban design knowledge around the subject of livability.

One question that may come up is, “How is livability determined? Whose livability are we talking about anyway?” The danger, of course, is that a livable communities agenda may be construed as representing the personal preference of a certain set of planners. One way to deal with such questions is to ground livability oriented work on empirical observation of how people interact with particular places and on other data about traffic, pollution, housing affordability, and the like. In recent decades, sophisticated forms of environmental design research have emerged, using tools such as surveys, behavior mapping, interviews, and post occupancy evaluations of housing developments. All of these techniques can be used to gather data on how to improve urban livability. Another way to determine the livability of different types of urban environments for different groups is to use visual preference surveys, which asks people to rate photographs of various environments. Such surveys usually show that people prefer moderate density, mixed-use residential environments similar to traditional suburbs, when shown images of various alternatives.

Efforts to improve community livability do not necessarily imply a political point of view, although inevitably such initiatives will have to address social and environmental issues. In fact, in many ways this movement is a conservative one in that it seeks to preserve quality of life and often looks to traditional urban fabrics for inspiration. Certain livability-oriented movements such as the New Urbanism have been criticized by the left as much as the right for ignoring fundamental dynamics of power (i.e., who is doing development and for what reasons) and for simply creating better-designed suburban enclaves for the wealthy.

Livability initiatives are quite compatible with market-oriented economic perspectives. They can be seen as modifications to the framework within which the market operates, necessary to preserve or enhance public goods not adequately valued by the market, such clean air, uncongested streets, friendly and convenient neighborhoods, parks and

open space, local stores and neighborhood centers, and preservation of local ecosystems. Livability programs rely on many traditional planning tools that have been employed since the early decades of the twentieth century in combination with markets, including zoning, building and urban design codes, and area planning.

Livability programs can form an important part of broader efforts to develop sustainable communities in California. Sustainability-oriented planning involves meeting environmental, economic, and equity goals simultaneously through coordinating different types of planning at many different levels (state, regional, local, etc.). Livability initiatives often meet these “three E’s.” For example, development of a pedestrian-oriented public realm meets environmental goals by reducing automobile use and pollution, economic goals by providing increased pedestrian traffic to support local businesses, and equity goals by improving transportation options for those without cars. Development of decent, affordable housing near public transit and town centers helps the environment by reducing consumption of open space and automobile use, the economy by providing a market for local businesses and reducing congestion on roads needed for commerce, and equity by providing housing options to those with low or moderate incomes. Livability and sustainability agendas, in short, overlap substantially and both can provide substantial benefits for California communities.



## **Threats to Community Livability in California and Potential Responses**

While development brings many benefits to the state in terms of jobs and opportunities, California's rapid population growth and urbanization threaten quality of life in its neighborhoods, towns and regions. These changes undermine many of the qualities that attracted residents to the state in the first place. Whether state, regional, and local governments along with the private sector can move aggressively in the next few years to preserve and enhance community livability will determine whether California cities and towns will be satisfying or even tolerable places in which to live in the long run.

Following are key areas of concern and potential policy responses. It is important to keep in mind that ensuring livable communities requires a range of interrelated actions that reinforce one another. Though these policy directions may seem very different, all eventually bear on the question of community livability.

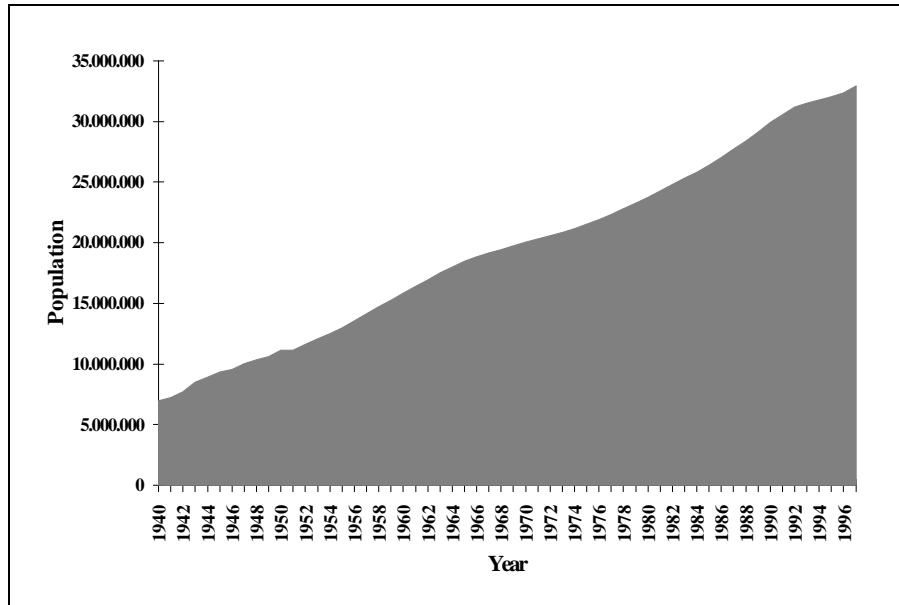
### **1. Rapid population growth**

The state's population, which was only 20 million a generation ago in 1970, reached 32,957,000 in 1997 and is projected to grow to 45.4 million by 2020, according to the California Department of Finance. More than half of this increase will come from the internal growth of the state's population—the excess of births over deaths—rather than from immigration. The population boom will place enormous pressure on land, quality of life, schools, infrastructure, and services in the state. Although its effects will be felt everywhere, growth will hit some parts of the state especially hard. The population of California's Central Valley, for example, is expected to triple between now and 2040. Computer modeling by the American Farmland Trust (1995) projects that urban growth in the Central Valley will consume more than one million acres of some of the world's best farmland over that time period.

The impact of population growth on community livability is a function of both population increase and lifestyle. Certainly, growth in sheer numbers of people exacerbates traffic congestion, air pollution, resource consumption, loss of open space, housing needs, and overcrowding of public facilities such as parks and schools. But these impacts vary depending on how people live and how many resources they consume. Factors such as the size of houses and lots, the numbers of cars owned, the miles driven, and the material goods purchased are important. Many of these factors vary according to wealth, and thus low-income immigrants often have less impact than more affluent long-time residents.

However, as immigrants move into the middle class, their impacts are likely to increase.

Figure 1. California's Growing Population, 1940–1997



Source: California State Department of Finance

Unfortunately, concern about the state's population increase has led to a number of counterproductive debates over immigration policy. Examples include the state's 1997 Proposition 209, which sought to restrict provision of services to immigrants, and the Sierra Club's 1998 internal referendum on whether restricting US immigration should be a focus of environmental advocacy (this position lost within the Sierra Club membership by nearly two to one). Such efforts tend to scapegoat immigrants and take on overtones of racial or ethnic prejudice. Moreover, efforts to restrict immigration are largely beyond the control of the state's policymakers. The challenge will be to refocus the population debate in ways that will prove more productive in the long run and less discriminatory against particular racial or ethnic groups.

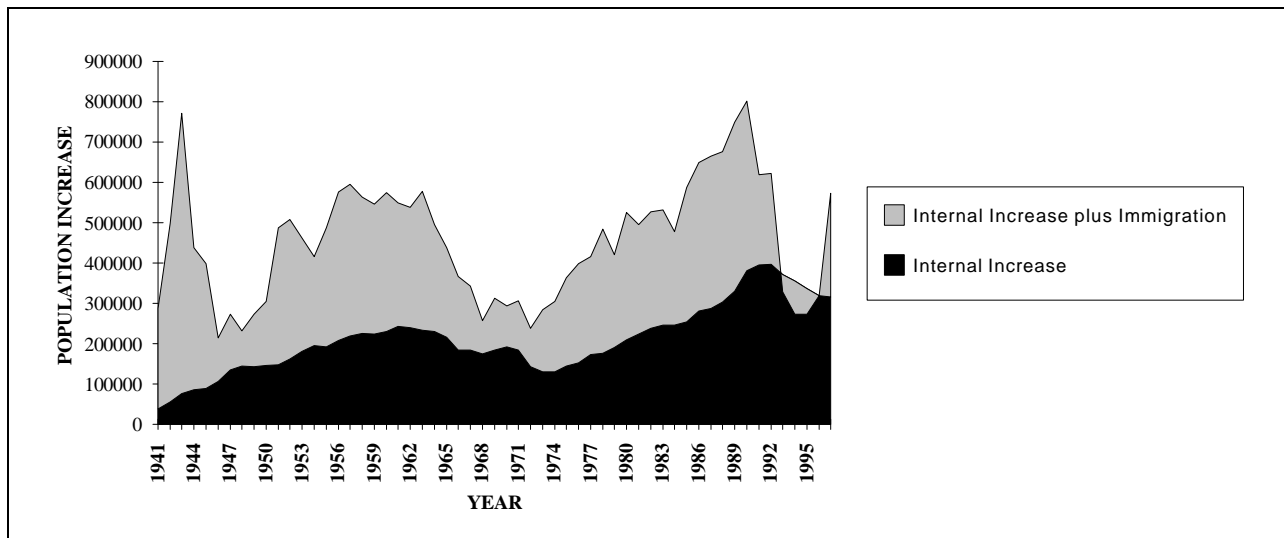
### Potential Solutions

Efforts to address California's population growth can take two directions: to restrict immigration, or to focus on reducing birth rates and family size within the state (see Figure 2). The first of these directions holds little promise. There is no constitutional way to restrict immigration into California from the rest of the country, and national immigration policy

is a subject not directly under the control of California policymakers. Attempts to radically restrict immigration into the US also invite charges of ethnic or racial favoritism. Immigration restrictions are notoriously difficult to enforce, and in states like California, both legal and illegal immigrants form a labor pool important to various industries. For such reasons, restricting the state's growth through immigration controls is unlikely to be successful.

Limiting the internal growth of California's population appears to hold somewhat more promise in the long run, if only because internal increase accounts for an ever larger proportion of the state's population growth and because a wealth of international evidence shows that birth rates tend to decline as populations become more educated and affluent and as women have more access to education, contraception, and opportunity. Internal growth is, in fact, the most important source of the state's population explosion. Between 1987 and 1997, "natural increase" (the excess of births over deaths) accounted for 3,508,000 new California residents, while net migration accounted for only 1,731,000 (Department of Finance, 1998). This imbalance was accounted for in part by the recession of the early 1990s, which led to net out-migration in the two years from 1993 to 1995. However, long-term trends show that internal increase is becoming an increasingly important factor.

Figure 2. Sources of California Population Growth, 1940–1997



Source: California State Department of Finance

Initiatives to reduce the internal growth of California's population might include the following:

- public education, discussion, and consciousness-raising about the problems of rapid population growth
- comprehensive family planning education and services for all communities,
- special parent skills and family planning programs aimed at school-aged populations
- programs to provide lower-income women with access to education and opportunity

The aim of such policies would be to gradually reduce family size within the state. Objections will likely be raised that family size is a culturally determined subject and that such action on the part of state and local governments is in some way ethnically discriminatory. However, it can be argued that the problems of overpopulation cross all demographic boundaries and must be addressed with a global perspective in mind. This viewpoint is well recognized in international development circles.

Another potential area of action, though more problematic, is to reconsider the belief that the purpose of economic development should be to attract as many businesses to the state as possible, which then in turn attract newcomers to California. Policy directions that seek to develop and preserve a stable collection of locally based industries supplying well-paying, meaningful jobs to state residents might be prioritized instead. Needless to say, such a policy direction will be difficult in an era of economic globalization, in which economic growth at all costs has become a mantra. Yet in the long run, the costs of growth are very significant to California, and continued rapid growth in resource use and employment runs counter to oft-stated goals of sustainable development. Continued growth in the value of the state's goods and services is certainly possible, but growth in materials consumed, wastes produced, or workers employed (assuming a stable state population) does not appear sustainable.

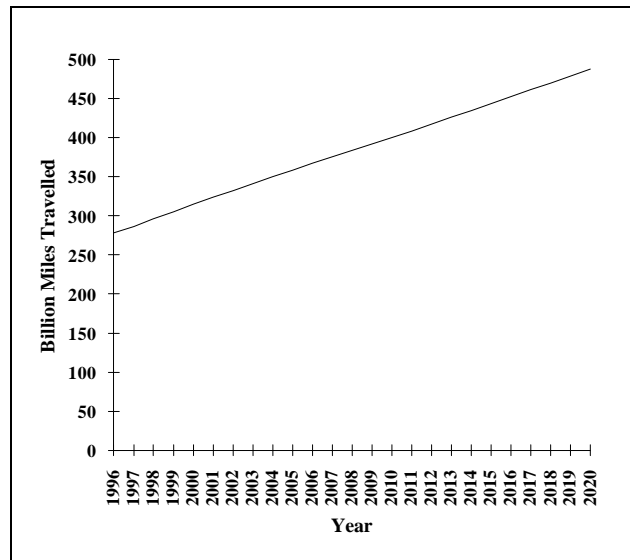
Since attempts to reduce the state's population growth will be difficult, it becomes imperative for California policymakers to plan wisely for the growth that does come. The effects of population increases on community livability can be substantially mitigated if the state's physical development adopts smart growth principles, with new residents accommodated first within existing communities in ways that enhance their livability, and with any new communities built at appropriate densities, with good urban design, near a range of transportation options, and with a

broad array of amenities such as parks and open space. These principles are important even if population is somehow stabilized. If population is stable but consumptive lifestyles increase—for example, with residents moving to large-lot suburban houses, buying second homes in the mountains, and driving more miles every year—livability impacts will still continue. The need is for both a stable population level and a stable, sustainable level of consumption

## 2. Worsening Traffic, Declining Transportation Choices

For years, polls have shown that transportation is the number one concern of California residents in many urban areas—and with good reason. Automobile traffic continues to increase even faster than the rate of population growth, with vehicle miles traveled (VMT) rising on a per capita basis. According to Caltrans estimates, overall VMT in the state will rise from 241,600 billion miles in 1990 to 487,841 billion miles in 2020—more than a one hundred percent increase. This growth in automobile use translates into increased congestion and delays for California residents. Vehicle hours of delay are expected to grow 249 percent in the Bay Area by the year 2020 (MTC, 1998). The Southern California Association of Governments projects a 330 percent increase in congestion.

Figure 3. Projected Vehicle Miles Traveled in California  
1996–2020



Source: Department of Transportation, California Motor Vehicle Stock, Travel, and Fuel Forecast

Statewide only 5.8 percent of commuters use public transit, and the nonautomobile share of transportation is shrinking annually. In San Diego, a whopping 91.2 percent of residents drive to work, while only 3.1 percent bike or walk and 4.2 percent take public transportation. Many new jobs are being located in transit-inaccessible locations, posing particular problems for those unable to afford a car or unable to drive. Fifty-six percent of new jobs created by 2015 in the San Francisco Bay Area are projected to be located in areas with low or very low transit frequency (Cohen and Donham, 1998).

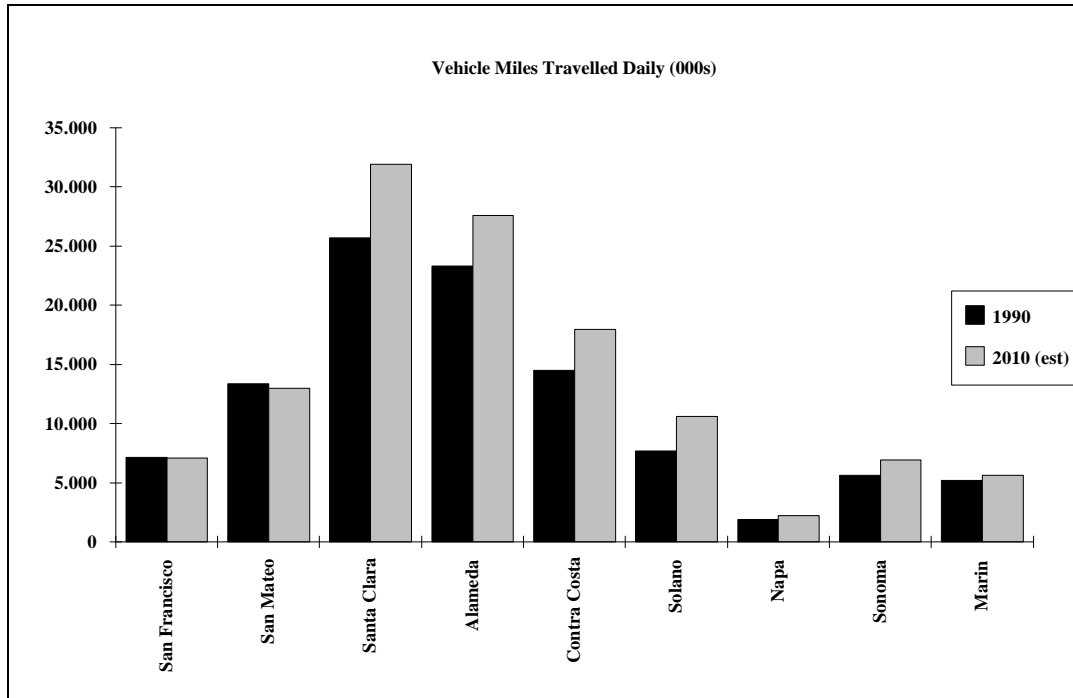
Current transportation trends undermine community livability in a variety of ways. Chief among these:

- Workplaces, homes, shops, and other daily destinations are separated from one another by increasing distances
- Residents have little choice but to drive for many trips since public transit, bicycling, or walking are not easy options
- Californians spend growing amounts of time commuting long distances or sitting in traffic
- Residents who cannot drive or who cannot afford a car are handicapped in terms of mobility
- Growing traffic creates problems of safety, comfort, and noise, particularly on residential streets
- Congestion slows goods transport and is an added cost for local businesses
- Motor vehicles worsen air and water quality by contributing about half of the emissions of many air pollutants and large quantities of heavy metals and oil which run off paved surfaces into waterways

Transportation planning in California has not proven effective at stemming the rise in congestion and automobile use. Just the opposite. Historically planners in California, like elsewhere in the US, have focused on increasing road capacity to meet potential travel demand as forecast by transportation demand models. However, many of these new roads have served to promote low-density suburban development at the urban fringe. Such suburban development, in turn, increases per capita automobile use (Holtzclaw, 1994), leading to a never-ending spiral of road building, sprawl, and traffic increase. This situation is changing as planners have come to understand that “you can’t build your way out of congestion.” In any case, the state doesn’t have the funds to continually expand its road

and freeway network in the future, and the environmental and social impacts of road expansion have attracted increasing opposition, making it difficult to site and construct new roads in many jurisdictions.

Figure 4. Growing Traffic in Bay Area Counties



Source: Metropolitan Transportation Commission (1996)

At the neighborhood level, rising traffic correlates strongly with decreased livability. The speed and volume of traffic on residential streets impacts the extent to which people know their neighbors and the amount which children, pedestrians, and cyclists use street and sidewalk areas (Appleyard, 1981; Engwicht, 1993). In one study of three San Francisco streets in the late 1970s, UC Berkeley professor Donald Appleyard showed residents a map of their street and asked them to identify which neighbors they knew. He then mapped these connections and found that very few people knew their neighbors on the high traffic volume street, while a fairly dense web of relationships existed on the low volume street, in part, because residents felt comfortable using the public space of the street and sidewalk to socialize. Other UC Berkeley studies have since produced similar results.

Efforts at “traffic-calming” by installing speed humps, diverters, filters, barriers and other traffic control devices have been made in many California communities since the 1970s. These have helped improve

neighborhood livability in many cases. However, in the context of rising traffic statewide, such initiatives are only stopgap measures and often create secondary problems by displacing traffic onto neighboring streets, slowing emergency vehicles, and frustrating drivers. There are limits to the number of stop signs, speed humps, diverters and other devices that can be placed in one community; at some point the overall volume of traffic must be addressed instead.

### Potential Solutions

Policies to reduce traffic congestion in the long run can follow three main directions:

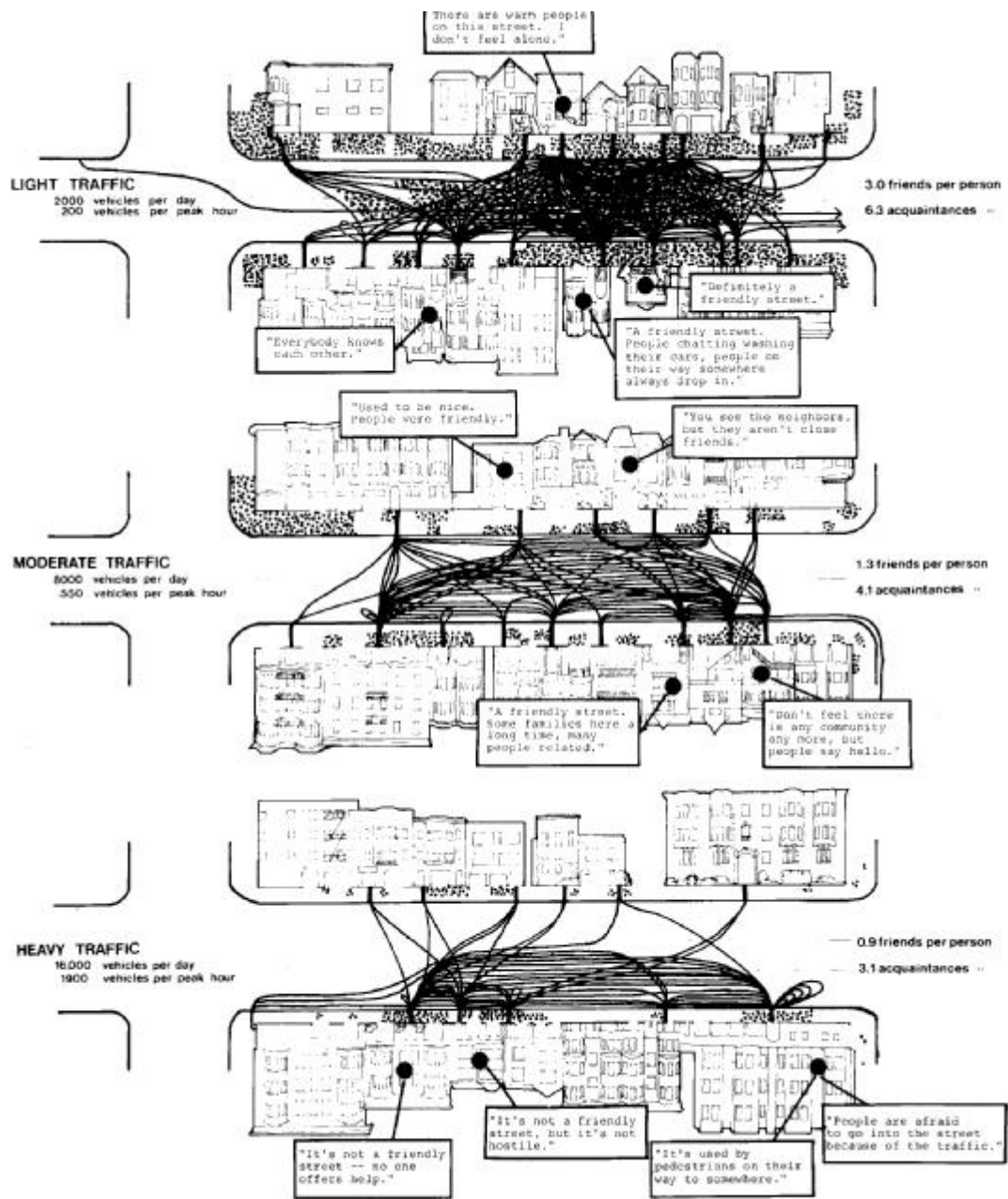
- changing land use patterns to promote mixed-use development, more compact communities, and reduced distances between jobs, homes, stores, schools, and recreational facilities
- improving alternatives to driving such as public transit, walking, and bicycling
- changing the pricing incentives for driving

Any one of these policy directions alone is not likely to produce dramatic changes in transportation behavior, given the enormous attractiveness of the automobile and the state's history of nearly a century of car-oriented development. Nor can or should automobile travel be eliminated entirely even if all three are vigorously pursued. Rather, the potential goal should be seen as a stable, somewhat lower level of automobile use that can improve community livability while still giving people the option of using a car when necessary.

Changing land use patterns holds significant potential to reduce driving in the long run, particularly if compact development is combined with pedestrian-oriented designs and land use diversity (Cervero and Kockelman, 1996). One study by John Holtzclaw (1994) for the Natural Resources Defense Council found that vehicle miles traveled per capita was about two-thirds lower in denser, mixed-use communities than in suburbs. Research for the Portland-area Metro agency shows similar findings and also indicates that the style of development (disconnected suburban streets versus a more conventional grid of connected streets) affects distances driven, congestion, and traffic volume on arterials (Daisa, 1997). The decreasing connectivity of California's street patterns is illustrated in Figure 6 below. Improving the balance of jobs and housing within regions is also viewed by many as a way to reduce driving (Cervero, 1997).



Figure 5. Neighborhood Relationships on Streets of Different Traffic Volume



From Donald Appleyard, *Livable Streets* (1981). As traffic volume increases, interactions between neighbors on a street decrease.

Improving public transportation, bicycle and pedestrian options is a second main strategy to reduce driving and improve community livability. These alternative modes are greatly facilitated by compact land use patterns with connecting streets. Particularly important for both equity and efficiency reasons are improvements to public transportation systems serving older, denser urban areas. The bus and light rail systems serving these populations in large California metropolitan areas have undergone numerous cutbacks in recent years and are generally plagued by a lack of funds for operations and capital expansion. In contrast, large amounts of resources have been invested in the L.A. Metro system and Bay Area BART extensions, heavy rail systems that serve smaller riderships, often in highly suburban areas. These systems have been criticized on social justice and cost-effectiveness grounds, leading to a mid-1990s lawsuit by the Los Angeles Bus Riders Union, which resulted in a settlement improving bus service.

Pricing incentives for reduced automobile use include gas taxes, road tolls, congestion pricing, registration fees, annual mileage-based fees, parking charges, subsidies for employee transit use, and the like. Of these, gas taxes are politically the most difficult, and at the levels likely to be achieved (less than 50¢ per gallon) are unlikely to bring about much change in driving behavior (though they can help raise funds for public transit) (Gordon, 1991, 182). Congestion pricing holds some potential for short-term reductions in congestion, largely by spreading traffic volume out during the day. However, parking charges and subsidized or free employee transit passes may be among the most useful strategies, since these are relatively effective at causing people to forego trips and look for alternatives. For example, in its first year-and-a-half of operation the Eco Pass program adopted by many Silicon Valley employers increased transit usage from 23.5 percent to 36.4 percent in 21 participating companies. Promoted by the Santa Clara Valley Manufacturing Group, this program offered free transit passes to 41,261 workers in companies like Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Intel and Wal-Mart.

One of the main problems in the transportation realm is that local governments and regional agencies have thus far not been able to implement most of the above policy directions. Municipal governments are preoccupied with maintaining local roads and tend to have little power or interest in regional transportation planning. Counties have gained greater power through county-wide Congestion Management Agencies (CMAs) set up by a ballot proposition in the early 1990s and strengthened by S.B. 45 in 1997. However, the CMAs have tended to fragment transportation planning within regions, and their boards are made up of local officials with little regional mandate.

For their part, regional metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) with authority over transportation feel hamstrung by lack of power over regional land use and the lack of political commitment by local elected officials to reducing automobile use. Although MPOs have made an increased number of grants to non-automobile modes of transportation—particularly following the passage of the federal Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA)—these agencies are still approving regional transportation plans in which automobile traffic increases substantially under all options studied.

Meanwhile, state agencies have done little to promote solutions to California's problems of increasing traffic. Caltrans remains an agency oriented towards building and maintaining roads, and there is little statewide support for land use strategies, improved bus and rail transit, or pricing changes, which might discourage car use.

California's transportation planning situation contrasts sharply with that of Oregon, where under the state's 1991 Transportation Planning Rule, local and regional governments are required to plan to reduce vehicle miles traveled per capita by 10 percent by 2010 and 20 percent by 2020. There is some skepticism in Oregon about whether these goals can be met, but many, if not most, of the state's local governments are making good faith efforts to promote alternative forms of transportation and coordinate land use with transportation systems in ways that are likely to reduce driving when compared with standard suburban development. In California, however, the state government and metropolitan planning organizations have been reluctant to even discuss the possibility of establishing such goals.

### 3. Loss of open space and farmland due to suburban sprawl

"Unchecked growth cannot be sustained forever. At some point this initial surge must mature into more managed, strategic growth. This is the point where we now stand in California." —*Beyond Sprawl* (Bank of America et al.)

Since the end of World War II, California cities and towns have become surrounded by large amounts of what is known as "suburban sprawl." This term refers to low-density patterns of development in which land uses are typically separated from one another, new development is often not contiguous with prior neighborhoods, and road networks offer few through-connections (in part because of the extensive use of cul-de-

sacs or loop roads). Due to its low density, sprawl exacerbates the problems of population growth by requiring vast amounts of land to house new residents.

Californians care strongly about controlling the physical expansion of their cities and towns, and since the mid-1980s, many of the state's jurisdictions have in fact adopted some form of growth management (Glickfeld and Levine, 1992; Governor's Office of Planning and Research, 1991). However, such initiatives have not been particularly effective at reducing suburban sprawl (Landis, 1991; Pincetl, 1994), and have frequently used approaches such as downzoning or annual permit allocation caps that are counterproductive in that they tend to raise housing sizes and prices while covering nearly equal amounts of land with lower-density growth.

Perhaps more importantly, growth control measures have focused on the quantity of new housing units built but not the character and quality of the overall urban fabric created, which is often a disjointed, low-density, aesthetically unattractive development pattern. Typically street and neighborhood layouts are created by developers, with relatively little public sector input on design and configuration. Design review does not exist in many communities, and in others is limited to requiring landscaping and sidewalks along arterial streets. Another problem is that local growth management initiatives focus primarily on residential growth and fail to control commercial or industrial development, which may also cover large amounts of land in inefficient patterns. The result of these failures is that suburban sprawl in California continues nearly unabated, resulting in the loss of open space, farmland, and wildlife habitat, as well as in traffic congestion and the creation of disjointed, inefficient suburban landscapes.

Table 1. California's Most Rapidly Urbanizing Counties

<u>Rank</u>	<u>County</u>	<u>Acres Urbanized 1994-96</u>
1	Riverside	6,379
2	San Diego	5,641
3	San Bernardino	5,609
4	Fresno	3,214
5	Kern	2,620
6	Contra Costa	2,570
7	Sacramento	2,534
8	Alameda	2,467
9	Placer	2,431
10	Solano	2,320

Source: California Department of Conservation, 1998

California's open space and agricultural land is being converted into residential or commercial uses at a rapid rate. In 1994–96, for example, the state lost 58,442 acres (91 square miles) of agricultural land and open space to urbanization, up from 54,307 acres in the previous two-year period (Department of Conservation, 1998). Urbanization is particularly rapid along major freeways and country roads, and is often clearly visible from a distance given the state's open landscape, meaning that the aesthetic and perceptual impacts of urban growth for the state's residents are even greater than the actual land covered by it would indicate. Net residential densities reached their lowest point in many cities during the 1950s and 1960s and are somewhat higher now due to the rising price of land. But densities of new development are still very low by urban standards in many jurisdictions—for example, around 14 persons per acre in Sacramento County (around 4.5 dwelling units per acre) and 17 persons per acre in Yolo County (around 5.5 du/acre) (Landis, 1993).

The loss of open land to suburban sprawl has a number of negative effects on community livability:

- The inefficient ways in which land is developed pose costs for residents in terms of convenience and quality of life. People have to drive farther to reach the destinations of daily life, and

do not have a range of services and recreational opportunities near the home.

- Sprawl degrades the aesthetic experience of living in the state's cities and towns. Instead of rolling hills, fields, woods and farms nearby, the view becomes seemingly endless expanses of generic suburbs, malls, and retail strips.
- Recreational opportunities become more difficult as residents have to drive further to get 'out of the city' and children can no longer explore nearby vacant parcels of land that have been turned into subdivisions.
- Development of agricultural land severs links between local communities and local farmers, and in many cases ends a way of life for California farm families.
- Sprawling development patterns impose financial costs on local governments and taxpayers, in that greater spending on roads, sewers and other infrastructure is needed.

Much of the problem has to do with the fact that development often occurs project by project, with few requirements that developers plan their subdivisions so as to develop or reinforce town or neighborhood centers, connect their roads with those of neighboring developments, relate their projects to public transportation, or build at densities that minimize use of greenfield land. The result is a monotonous urban fabric of subdivision "pods" that are relatively isolated from one another or from any community centers that could provide services or a sense of identity.

A related cause of sprawl has to do with the economics of development. Although in recent years local governments have increasingly required developers to pay for costs of new roads, sewers, schools, and other municipal infrastructure or services, the private sector still does not pay all the extra costs of sprawl when compared with compact or infill development. The congestion impacts of new traffic, health impacts of increased air pollution, aesthetic and recreational impacts of replacing open space with retail strips and subdivisions, and financial impacts of providing social services to deal with problems in now-abandoned central city areas are not factored into the price of new suburban residential or retail development. Meanwhile, governments provide many subsidies for such development, ranging from federal subsidies for home mortgages to state and federal financing of roads to local tax abatements and infrastructure provision for new commercial or industrial development in the urban fringe. The result is a system in which subsidized suburban development provides the private sector with short-term financial benefits while

imposing long-term costs on California's residents and the state's environment.

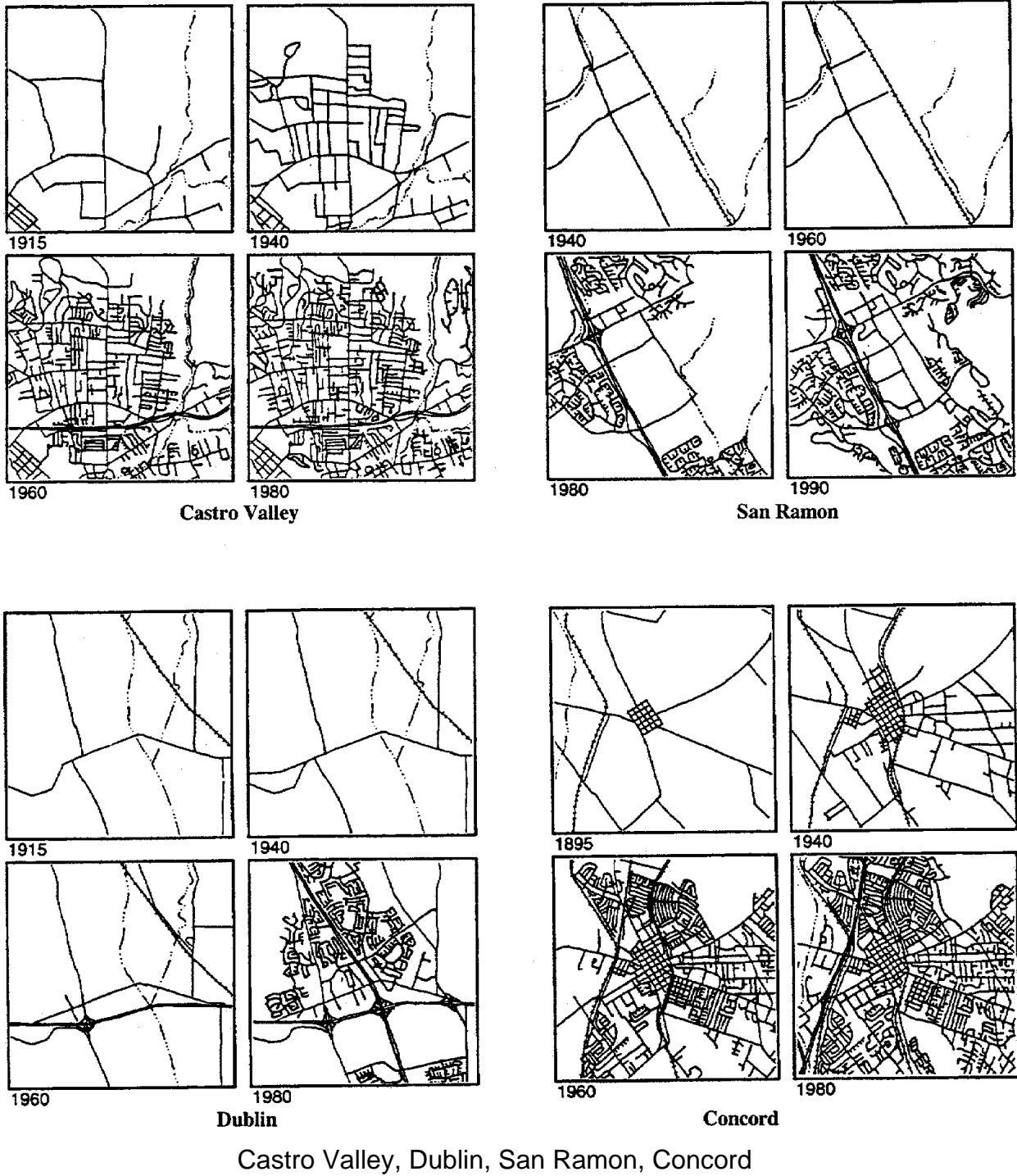
A number of statewide growth management reports and projects, such as the Urban Growth Policy Project established by the state legislature in 1988 and the Governor's Growth Management Council established in 1991, have failed to develop the political will and strategic vision to bring about change in land use policy at the state level. Regional MPOs are voluntary associations of local officials and have no power or mandate to coordinate land use. Consequently growth management policies are adopted piecemeal at the local level in the absence of broader state and regional planning frameworks. Several decades ago these local policies frequently took the form of downzoning of land, adoption of numerical caps on new housing units, or service boundary limits. More recently, Urban Growth Boundaries (UGBs) have been adopted in Ventura County as well as more than a dozen communities in the Bay Area. However, these local programs are frequently undermined by the lack of state or regional coordination. For example, a UGB in one city may result in developers moving outside the city's borders to build sprawling developments on other land not protected in this way, rather than encouraging them to invest in development in the city center or on centrally-located brownfield sites.

### Potential Solutions

Many observers agree that more compact, pedestrian- and transit-oriented development patterns are essential to improving the long-term livability of California communities (e.g., Local Government Commission, 1992). There is also an increasingly sophisticated understanding both in California and nationally of how growth control measures can best work. Lessons learned from the experience of communities in this state and others such as Oregon, Florida, New Jersey, and Vermont include the following:

- Trying to restrict growth at the local government level by simply downzoning or imposing building moratoriums is counterproductive. Such measures often simply raise housing prices, exclude lower income residents, consume more land for low-density uses, and cause growth to go elsewhere.
- Simply adopting an Urban Growth Boundary without additional infill policies and incentives is also unlikely to produce a compact, well-planned metropolis. Builders continue to cover available land inside the UGB with standard suburban development until land disappears, prices rise, and political

Figure 6. Patterns of Sprawl:



Credit: Michael Southworth and Peter Owens



pressure mounts to expand the boundary. To be effective, a UGB must be combined with infill policies, local rezoning, expanded urban design guidance and oversight, and measures to ensure housing affordability. The UGB must be locked in for long enough periods of time—usually a minimum of 20 years—so that builders and citizens take it seriously and plan accordingly. However, many observers also believe that mechanisms should exist for small incremental adjustments to be made in the UGB from time to time, as in the Portland metro area.

- Changing the mix of housing types to emphasize multifamily ownership and rental construction (including, for example, townhouses, stacked townhouses, duplexes, and larger multi-unit buildings) can help reduce land use requirements and other impacts of growth. According to the state's Department of Finance, 60 percent of land zoned for 1995–2020 residential development in California is earmarked for single family homes. Reducing that percentage can help make compact growth possible. Reducing minimum lot size requirements in local zoning codes, and preventing "ranchette" lots of between one and five acres is also important.
- Strong state policy frameworks are essential for local governments to make progress on growth management. Weak or inconsistent state direction, as during various periods in New Jersey, Washington and Maine, has not proven effective. But the state role should not be solely top-down and coercive. This was a particular problem with Florida's program, where local governments widely ignored or evaded state regulations (Porter, 1997). Rather, the most effective approach may be similar to that used in Oregon and planned for Maryland, which sets general statewide goals, combines funding incentives and technical assistance with state mandates, and allows considerable latitude for regional and local implementation.

Drawing on such lessons, the challenge in California will be to find ways to achieve compact growth in a state with strong and highly diverse local governments and development interests. A 1991 report by Judith Kunofsky for Sierra Club California noted a number of obstacles to growth management in the state. These include:

- greater profits in sprawl than in compact development
- the short-term lure of living on the urban fringe

- the fact that land use trends are treated as sacrosanct
- the problem of knowledge about alternative patterns of development being scattered or lacking
- lack of action by state agencies, or counterproductive actions (such as funding freeways)
- turf warfare between regional agencies
- a lack of well-articulated state or regional visions (Kunofsky, 1991)

Such obstacles must be addressed. The process of doing so will not be quick or easy, and the challenge of changing entrenched resistance to any sort of planning will be most difficult. However, a large number of policy initiatives could potentially help bring about better growth management. Based on the experience of other states, these include:

- establishing statewide growth management goals and policies
- creating a statewide agency to oversee and assist with local and regional implementation of these goals and policies
- setting up a state system of rewards and incentives for communities to pursue compact development and "smart growth" policies
- requiring that local communities establish Urban Growth Boundaries, put in place development restrictions on land outside these boundaries, and bring local general plans into accord with state growth management goals
- streamlining permitting procedures for projects that meet growth management goals
- enacting statewide fiscal reform to reduce revenue-driven development policies (the "fiscalization of land use")
- establishing stronger regional planning frameworks, and giving regions authority to review any project of regional significance
- requiring development of regional land use plans, and conditioning approval of state or federal infrastructure funds on local adoption of plans that are consistent with these
- instituting "full cost" pricing of infrastructure extended into newly developing areas

- establishing funding mechanisms at state or regional levels for purposes such as acquisition of conservation easements on agricultural land or "banking" land around future transit stations to ensure transit-supportive development

In general, there is a considerable consensus emerging in California as nationally about the proper directions for "smart growth" and the potential policy mechanisms for bringing it about. The problem is mustering the political will to do these things, and that is an area in which the state has been particularly lacking. Examples such as Oregon and Maryland show that establishment of an effective growth management framework requires development of a political coalition including diverse interests such as farmers, environmentalists, and homebuilders. Leadership must be found and nurtured within each of these groups, and the groundwork laid for a sustained political effort lasting many years. It should be stressed, however, that growth management has benefits for each political constituency. For example, homebuilders in Oregon have benefited from increased certainty about where development will go, as well as from a state requirement that developments meeting growth management goals must be permitted within 120 days, or else are automatically approved. Farmers benefit from the preservation of farmland and lower land assessments outside the UGB.

Judging by the experience of other states, a strong state role in growth management is necessary if localities and regions are to make significant progress towards compact growth. We have several successful precedents for such state action in California. The Senate Urban Growth Policy Project noted in 1989 that state-led planning processes have in fact achieve considerable successes in the last in the areas of environmental protection and growth management. The San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission, formed by the McAteer-Petris Act of 1965, has led efforts to protect San Francisco Bay and control development on its shores that affects environmental quality of the estuary. The California Coastal Commission was created by the state in the 1970s to protect the coastline, and is widely viewed as having accomplished a great deal toward this goal. And the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, formed by the legislature in 1969 and strengthened in 1980, has helped safeguard environmental quality of the scenic Lake Tahoe area (Senate Office of Research, 1989).

Whatever the exact set of policies and institutions set up in the state, what is important is that public goals be asserted proactively within the land development process, rather than the current situation in which jurisdictions too often respond to piecemeal developer-initiated proposals.

An active public sector role in determining land use, urban design, and community form can potentially reduce or end sprawl and support the long-term livability of California communities.

#### 4. Growing Fears about Crime and Safety

Californians will not feel that their communities are truly livable unless they are relatively free from concerns about crime and personal safety. These fears are a main reason that people move to suburbs or to gated communities (Blakely and Snyder, 1997). Safety concerns are particularly great among particular groups such as families with young children, women, and the elderly. Such fears may also be aggravated by local TV news programs, which often take a "police blotter" approach, highlighting sensationalistic crimes and traffic accidents.

The reality is that in California, as across the nation, violent crime has decreased substantially during the 1990s. Statewide, criminal offenses per 100,000 population dropped from 6,518 in 1985 to 5,831 in 1995, a decrease of 11 percent. Most of this drop occurred in crimes against property, but violent crimes decreased somewhat as well. Although crime scenes frequently make the television news and attain high visibility, California cities do not in fact rank highly nationally in terms of either violent crime or property crime according to statistics collected by the US Bureau of the Census. And within the state, crime rates are not necessarily correlated with size of urban areas. In recent years, San Bernardino, Fresno, Stockton, Sacramento, and Bakersfield have had higher rates of serious crime than San Diego, Los Angeles, or San Francisco. And a number of large California cities actually have relatively low crime rates, among them San Jose, Torrance, Fremont, and Sunnyvale.

Nevertheless, the public's concerns about safety and the perceived social pathology of cities must be taken seriously by planners and policy-makers. Perceptions that denser or more urban environments are less safe than low-density suburban ones must be addressed, and new models of relatively dense urban community developed that provide both the appearance and reality of safety.

In some cases, public safety concerns relate to very real social problems, caused in part by cutbacks in social service programs during the 1980s, the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, chronic shortages of affordable housing, and high unemployment rates for some communities and groups, which must be addressed through social policy. However, in other cases, safety concerns rely on unfounded stereotypes that dense neighborhoods are less safe than lower-density ones, that diverse environments are less safe than homogenous ones, and that crime is

inevitably associated with certain ethnic, racial, or economic groups. These stereotypes can be combatted in part by providing models of diverse and relatively dense urban places that are also safe, pleasant, green, and highly livable.

The safety problem is a complex and multifaceted one—people can feel "safe" or "unsafe" in many different ways. For example, increased traffic and the lack of sidewalks and safe walking or bicycling routes mean that many parents do not feel that their children are safe walking or biking to school. This problem can be partially addressed through urban design and transportation planning. The lack of people on the street in urban areas makes people feel unsafe on city streets. This problem can be addressed in part through housing policy and steps to develop downtowns as around-the-clock living and entertainment areas. People can also feel unsafe driving in automobiles or bicycling on city streets. Particular street improvements and steps to improve transportation alternatives may be able partially to address these concerns. A comprehensive approach to promoting public safety will include initiatives to improve actual and perceived safety on many different fronts.

"Given families' concerns about urban crime and education, the Little House in the Subdivision reflects a logical desire to escape social pathologies more than an emotional embrace of sprawl. In fact, when given visual choices between traditional town patterns of development and competing images of suburban sprawl, the vast majority of residents (including those who live in suburbia) prefer compact development."  
—Rick Cole, Nancy Bragado, Judy Corbett, Sharon Sprowls (1996)

### Potential Solutions

State and local policing, incarceration policies, and social service initiatives are beyond the scope of this paper. However, a number of city planning and urban design approaches can help address safety concerns. Policy options include:

- locating housing downtown to put more people on the street at all hours
- creating pedestrian-friendly streetscapes and mixed-use neighborhoods to likewise repopulate public spaces
- adding specific design features such as porches, stoops, and strategically placed windows to put "eyes on the street"

- improving the transparency of urban environments so that passers-by can see what is going on in particular locations
- adding good lighting of streets and public spaces, as well as safety call boxes and frequent public transportation
- creating buffers (though not necessarily locked gates) between the public realm and private or semi-private open space near dwellings (Jacobs, 1961; Newman, 1972; Cooper Marcus, 1986)
- reusing vacant lots and brownfield sites that can become problem areas
- creating mixed-income housing so as to not overly concentrate lower-income people in one place
- acting quickly to prevent blight by enforcing building codes and cleaning up neighborhoods
- promoting public and private reinvestment in declining neighborhoods

Many of these initiatives rely on relatively easy, common-sense design solutions that can be integrated into the daily lexicon of architects and planners. However, it should be stressed again that design approaches by themselves cannot deal with the large mass of accumulated social problems in California society which lead to perceived safety problems. Additional social service, housing, education, economic development, and social equity initiatives are essential to deal with these issues in the long run.

## 5. Inequality is Increasing Within Metro Areas

The economic gaps and social inequities inherent in a two-tier society are likely to widen. Whole communities are liable to be left behind, bearing the costs of disinvestment, decline, job flight and social service [cutbacks], while other communities reap the benefits of growth.

—Senate Urban Growth Policy Project, 1989

Inequality of income and wealth is growing sharply in California. Disparities between the earnings of male workers at the 75<sup>th</sup> income percentile and those at the 25<sup>th</sup> grew 61 percent between 1967 and 1997 (Reed, 1999). Meanwhile, inflation-adjusted wages have fallen sharply for

middle and lower-income workers. According to the Public Policy Institute of California,

“Between 1969 and 1997, real wages for male workers grew only at the very top (90th percentile) of the income distribution, and that growth was not dramatic—13 percent over the entire period.... At the median and below, wages declined dramatically and steadily. The 10th and 25th percentiles fell by about 40 percent. In other words, while the rich got a little richer, the poor got a whole lot poorer.” (Reed, 1999)

On top of this growing inequality, the state's recent land development patterns led to a growing polarization of wealth between traditional neighborhoods in older central cities and inner suburbs and newer communities in more rapidly growing outer suburbs. As fringe suburban areas grow, they are relatively free to plan and zone themselves in ways that attract affluent residents, large industrial facilities, and regional shopping centers. Less-affluent communities remain in central cities and older suburbs, which face problems of decaying infrastructure, declining tax base, and high social service needs. Even some suburbs that are only twenty years old are beginning to deteriorate and lose tax base. The majority of the state's current residents are disadvantaged by this system, while relatively small numbers of people in high tax base outer suburbs reap the benefits.

As in other metropolitan areas around the country, California's suburbs are becoming increasingly differentiated and polarized, with close-in, older suburbs often struggling to maintain tax base and services while distant, newly developing communities gain population and commercial development. This trend opens up the possibility of political alliances between central cities and older inner suburbs in order to meet regional goals or adopt equalization strategies such as regional tax sharing (Orfield, 1996).

Income disparities between jurisdictions in the same metropolitan region can be huge. In 1995, for example, average household income in the affluent Bay Area community of Atherton was six times that in Oakland, a gap that is projected to grow to eight times by 2020 (Association of Bay Area Governments, 1998). A study by the Urban Habitat Program found that during the 1980s median incomes grew rapidly in outlying Bay Area communities—for example, 65.1 percent in Brentwood, 44.8 percent in Cotati, and 39.9 percent in Los Altos Hills—but quite slowly in less affluent older inner suburbs—2.8 percent in Milbrae and 4.7 percent in Pinole (Urban Habitat Program, 1998). The same study determined that in 1996 the tax base in 36 "low tax base/low social health" Bay Area cities

was 73 percent of the regional average, while the average tax base in the region's newer suburbs was 167 percent of the regional average.

Among the ways that growing inequities undermine community livability are the following:

- Existing downtowns and neighborhoods lose retail, residents, attractiveness, and the tax resources to fund education, services, and infrastructure repair
- Working class neighborhoods and communities of color become even more spatially segregated from more affluent and predominantly white neighborhoods
- Jurisdictions with the least tax base face the highest need to provide social services, and are unable to provide these services to their residents
- Educational systems in central cities suffer as per pupil funding declines and many students move to the suburbs or attend private schools
- Residents in less well-off communities lose access to jobs, which move to the outer suburbs, and lower wage workers have difficulty in finding transportation to these jobs
- The concentration of poverty fuels social problems
- Residents everywhere lose the benefits of living amidst cultural and economic diversity and getting to know people different from themselves. Misperceptions may spread because people do not know individuals in other racial or ethnic groups.

### Potential Solutions

One basic course of action to remedy growing inequities between traditional neighborhoods in central cities and older suburbs and new outer suburbs would be to equalize per capita tax revenue across the metropolitan area. All or a portion of new revenue would be contributed to a metropolitan pool and distributed according to population. Such a system has been in place in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area since the early 1970s, where 40 percent of new sales tax revenues are shared between local governments.

This approach is typically resisted by many suburban jurisdictions who argue that taxation should be locally rather than regionally controlled, and is resisted as well by those who see suburbs as increasingly



independent of central cities. However, others point out the interdependencies between suburbs and central cities, and argue that suburbs benefit enormously from their location within the region without paying many of the costs of declining infrastructure and high social service needs at the center of the region (Orfield, 1997).

David Rusk (1993), the former mayor of Albuquerque, argues that suburban economic vitality depends on metropolitan equity and central city health: "The smaller the income gap between city and suburb, the greater the economic progress for the whole metropolitan community." Support for this position comes from researchers such as Savitch et al. (1993), who find that well-off central cities tend to have well-off suburbs and vice versa, and from Jane Jacobs (1984), who argues that cities are the economic engines that drive the development of surrounding regions.<sup>1</sup>

## 6. Community Identity and "Sense of Place" are being Undermined

One of the most pervasive yet elusive effects of California's development patterns is the loss of a sense of living in places with vitality, identity, and meaning. Since the end of the Second World War, the state's traditional, compact towns and cities have been overshadowed by a spread-out, mass-produced suburban fabric that lacks distinctiveness and historic connection. Land uses in the state have become increasingly fragmented, homes have become widely separated from work places and retail centers through single-use zoning, and development has occurred in ever-larger increments to meet the desires of homebuilders for economies of scale and businesses for large floor plans with easy automobile access.

There is nothing unique or distinctive about the communities that are being created for Californians to live in. Much new suburban housing is built within subdivisions of hundreds or thousands of units with highly repetitive designs, materials, lot sizes, and colors. Shopping takes place in chain stores or malls similar to virtually every other chain store or mall in the country. Residents drive along freeways and arterials characterized by the same generic road design and surrounding strip development as in every other state of the union. Termed "the geography of nowhere" by writer James Howard Kunstler (1995), this late-twentieth century landscape of generic subdivisions, retail strips, malls, and freeways denies residents a sense of connection with anything authentic and unique to a particular locality.

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<sup>1</sup> For a thoughtful discussion of this debate in the context of a California metropolitan region, see Association of Bay Area Governments, "Interdependence: The Changing Dynamic Between Cities and Suburbs in the San Francisco Bay Area," Oakland, November 1996.

"We reject the past and the future, and this repudiation is manifest in our graceless constructions. Our residential, commercial and civic buildings are constructed with the fully conscious expectation that they will disintegrate in a few decades." —James Howard Kunstler

The new California landscape is also increasingly privatized. Some communities hide behind gates and guardhouses; others are simply secluded behind soundwalls and greenery, with few entrances into the neighborhood or street connections to the rest of the town or city. Shopping no longer occurs on main streets so much as in privately owned malls. Many new streets no longer have sidewalks, that traditional public space in which people used to meet friends or neighbors. The "public structure" of the landscape—streets, parks, squares, civic buildings, churches, and schools—has become much less important in organizing urban form than the private space of malls, office parks, and self-contained subdivisions (Southworth and Owens, 1993).

On a practical level, although today's suburban communities work well for some residents, they are less livable for others. Typically suburbs work best for young families seeking privacy and a quiet, relatively traffic-free environment in which to raise children. However, even then long commutes may reduce parents' time with children, and the lack of nearby day care or recreational facilities may be a problem. Suburbs work less well when children become teenagers who must be chauffeured everywhere by their parents (or later given cars of their own), or for children who may feel socially isolated if surrounding houses do not have similar-age children. They also do not work well for many single people who often want to be closer to gathering places and other unattached individuals, or even for single parents or stay-at-home parents who may likewise want to feel part of social networks beyond the immediate street. Even the immediate street does not provide a social setting for many residents, who may not know their next-door neighbors. In addition suburban neighborhoods often handicap the elderly, who may not want to or be able to drive to shopping or social activities, and are likewise difficult for those who have physical disabilities or cannot afford a car.

California's suburban neighborhoods usually have no clearly defined center and few places where people are likely to gather in the course of daily life. Sidewalks are empty of pedestrians, if they exist at all. It is often literally impossible to walk or bicycle to surrounding areas beyond the subdivision. Although this privatized landscape does provide a feeling of

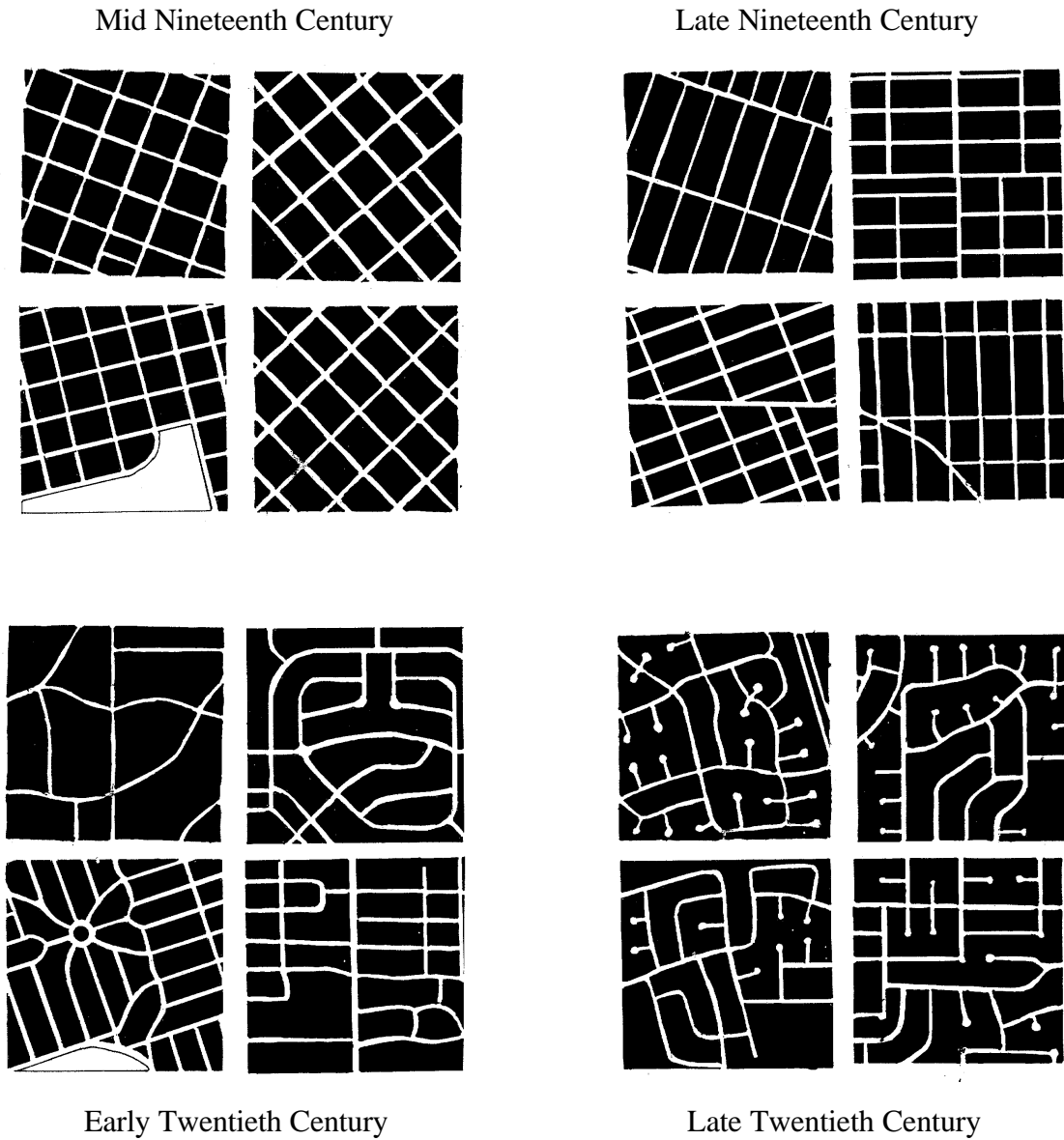
security and stability for many residents, and may be seen as providing good schools for children, it undermines the broader fabric of community within California.

"Builders and developers always fall back on the argument that if people didn't like what was produced, they wouldn't buy it. This is a vastly oversimplified version of what's really going on. Many homebuyers buy houses or communities that they know are flawed. They buy them because of the location, the quality of the local schools, or the price, even though they might prefer houses and communities very different from what the builders and developers are offering."

—Philip Langdon, *A Better Place to Live: Reshaping the American Suburb* (1994)

It is hard to appreciate just how dramatically the form of California's residential neighborhoods has changed in the past 100 years. Figures 7 and 8 below illustrate the evolution of street patterns during this time. During the mid-nineteenth century, most new urban development in California took the form of a square-block grid, a form which provides easy pedestrian, bicycle, transit, and automobile connections across the city and tightly-linked neighborhoods. At the turn of the century, rectangular block grid forms became popular, which provide similar advantages. Later, California's residential street patterns became more and more fragmented, eventually containing many loops and cul-de-sacs. These neighborhoods make walking from one place to another very difficult and tend to be relatively isolated from the rest of the city or town.

Figure 7. Evolving Urban Form in Central Valley Cities  
1850–2000



Each time period shows typical street patterns from four Central Valley cities: Sacramento (upper left), Stockton (lower left), Fresno (upper right), and Modesto (lower right). During the past 150 years street fabrics in these cities have become increasingly disconnected, making travel by any mode more difficult (especially walking), using land less efficiently, and separating neighborhoods from one another.

Figure 8. A Typology of Street Patterns in California: The Highly-Connected Street Pattern of Historic Gridded Towns vs. More Recent Suburban Forms

	Gridiron (c. 1900)	Fragmented Parallel (c. 1950)	Warped Parallel (c. 1960)	Loops and Lollipops (c. 1970)	Lollipops on a Stick (c. 1980)
Street Patterns					
Intersections					
Lineal Feet of Streets	20,800	19,000	16,500	15,300	15,600
# of Blocks	28	19	14	12	8
# of Intersections	26	22	14	12	8
# of Access Points	19	10	7	6	4
# of Loops & Cul-de- Sacs	0	1	2	8	24

Credit: Michael Southworth and Peter Owens

Many writers have suggested that rekindling an attachment to particular geographical places and communities may be a way to revive a sense of civic commitment in a globalizing world (e.g., Castells, 1996; Giddens, 1993; Etzioni, 1993; Hiss, 1990; Langdon, 1994; Kunstler, 1996). The question is how to do this.

### Potential Solutions

No simple answer presents itself, but the evidence suggests that a number of strategies are likely to help revive local identity and sense of place:

- focusing on the creation of city, town, and neighborhood centers
- emphasizing unique architectural, ecological, cultural, or historic qualities of places

- preserving historic buildings and other elements of the urban fabric that help communicate a sense of history and connect observers to past times or cultures
- preserving and restoring landscape features such as creeks, hills, and shorelines that help give communities an ecological identity
- promoting a fine-grained mix of buildings and land uses that is likely to give places a richness and texture too often lacking in large-scale new developments
- improving urban design review of new development and creating design guidelines that promote use of local architectural styles, building materials, and landscaping
- adding distinctive sculptures, gates, fountains, or other landmark features to public spaces
- adding educational materials and signs to highlight distinctive features of local places
- slowing or reducing automobile traffic in downtowns, residential neighborhoods, and other important community places, since high traffic speed and volume make places less pleasant for human activity
- supporting distinctive local shops and businesses

None of these strategies by itself is going to reverse the sense of placelessness that many people feel or counter "the geography of nowhere." However, if combined as part of an overall strategy, such initiatives can begin to make a difference. Particularly important is the adoption of common-sense urban design principles such as those promoted by the Congress for the New Urbanism. These include requirements such as the following:

- that new residential developments include sidewalks
- that new commercial buildings face the street (rather than parking lots) to create more attractive streetscapes
- that new downtown construction include first floor retail to increase pedestrian use of the street
- that new streets form part of a connecting urban grid or fabric
- that ample parks, squares and open spaces be included in new development

- that distinctive natural features such as streams and mature trees be preserved and celebrated by new development
- that materials, building siting, and architecture honor the local and regional context

"All planning should be in the form of complete and integrated communities containing housing, shops, work places, schools, parks and civic facilities essential to the daily life of residents....The community should have a center focus that combines commercial, civic, cultural, and recreational uses." —Ahwahnee Principles

Livable communities above all feature "people places"—places where people like to congregate, hang out, meet friends, or savor the public environment. One of the most important steps toward creating such people places is to preserve, enhance, or develop vibrant centers for California communities. A number of specific policy changes can help do this. Area plans, municipal general plans, and zoning ordinance revisions can be used to designate town or neighborhood centers. Cities can add attractive urban amenities such as fountains, cafes, plazas, and parks. They can also locate public institutions and services, including government facilities, stadiums and museums, in core urban areas. Municipalities can require that one percent or more of the cost of new downtown projects be set aside for public art. Planners can work with for-profit and non-profit developers to add housing to downtowns to ensure that people are in these central areas twenty-four hours a day, or to add shops at the center of residential subdivisions to provide a central focus for those communities. Banks can offer location-efficient mortgages to provide a financial incentive to homeowners who locate near downtowns and transit (and thereby minimize their driving).

Many of these steps are well within the ability of cities, counties, and metropolitan regions to undertake, simply by targeting investments to support city and town centers, and by undertaking modest urban design improvements. The result can be creation of places that develop a distinctive identity and add richness and meaning to the lives of local residents.

## 7. Unaffordable Housing

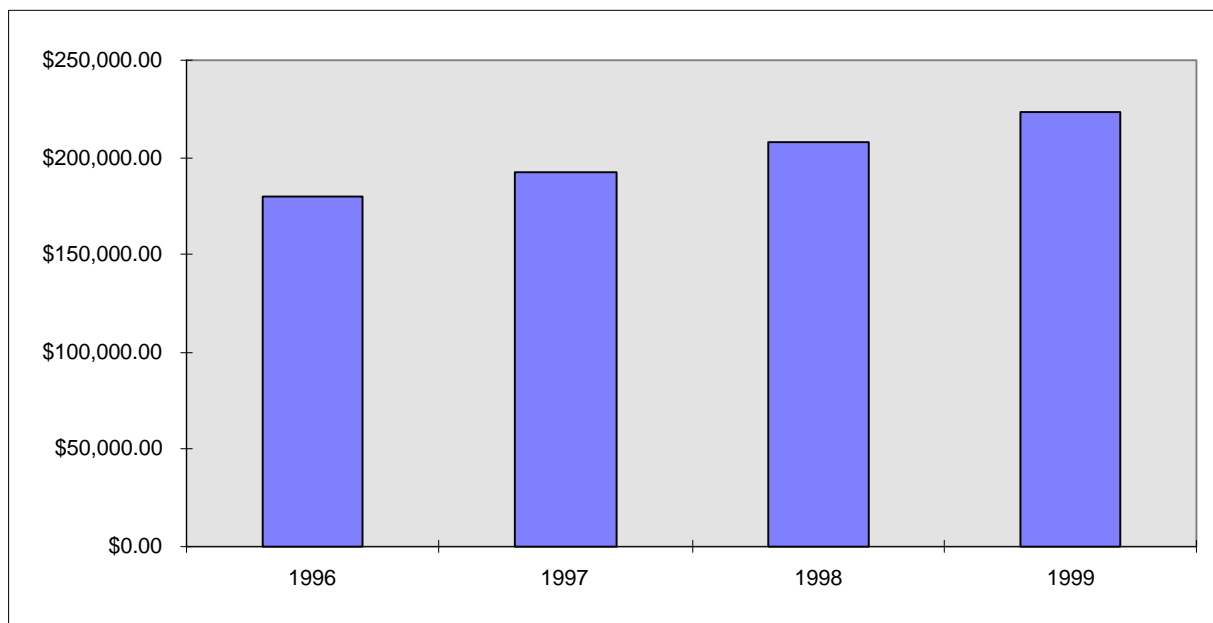
Many parts of the state are experiencing a severe housing crisis. Even though average incomes in many parts of the state are high, much of

the population does not share in this wealth and both rental and for-sale residential property is increasingly beyond the financial reach of many residents. California has some of the nation's most expensive real estate and housing is consuming a large and growing percentage of residents' paychecks. In 1998, only 39 percent of the state's housing stock was "affordable" (generally considered to be a third or less of take-home income), compared with 55 percent of US housing generally (California Association of Realtors, 1998). California housing affordability declined slightly from 1997 to 1998, while national housing affordability rose somewhat.

The median California new home price of \$224,000 in 1999 was more than one-third above the national average. Between 1982 and 1997 median prices in the state increased 83.2 percent. Rents are also rising rapidly, especially with the state legislature's recent action to abolish vacancy control in the state (allowing rents to rise to market levels whenever a rent-controlled unit is vacated). In the Bay Area, for example, between the end of 1995 and late 1997 rents rose an average of 33.3 percent in San Francisco, 29.1 percent in Santa Clara County, 24.6 percent in San Mateo County, and 16.9 percent in Marin County (Association of Bay Area Governments, 1998). While California has had an annual average need for over 200,000 units during most of the 1990s, permits have averaged just over 100,000 units annually. The greatest shortfall has been in multifamily construction, which constituted only 24 percent of residential permits during 1990–1997 (California Department of Housing, 1999).



Figure 9. Rising Median Home Values in California



Source: California Department of Housing and Community Development, 1999

The new housing being built in the state consists predominantly of single-family homes (76 percent in 1997) rather than multifamily units which are likely to be more affordable apartments or condominiums. New houses in the state are also getting larger (a factor that tends to increase prices). Between 1982 and 1997, the average size of a new home sold in California rose 27 percent from 1,610 square feet to 2,045 square feet (Construction Industry Research Board, 1998). Such figures indicate that in a state with an increasingly polarized income distribution, the for-profit construction industry is focusing on large, high-amenity housing for middle-to-upper-end consumers, rather than smaller, more affordable units for some of the groups most squeezed by recent price rises.

Many other indicators show the extent of the housing problem facing the state. For most of the 1990s, California needed an average of more than 200,000 units annually, but permits averaged only slightly more than 100,000. Much-needed multifamily housing units represented only twenty-four percent of these permits. Rents increased dramatically in most urban areas during the 1990s. By late in the decade, more than eighty percent of very low income households were paying more than fifty percent of their income for housing costs. The state sank to third lowest in the nation in terms of homeownership. Residential overcrowding doubled in California between 1980 and 1990 and continued to rise during the nineties. The state also faces loss of much of its federally subsidized

housing stock, including up to 92,000 Section 8 units whose contracts expire by 2002 (California State Department of Housing, 1999).

Additional problems result from the inequitable distribution of affordable housing within metropolitan areas. State law requires local governments to include plans for meeting their "fair share" regional affordable housing targets within local planning documents, but this requirement is largely ignored by localities. The result is that affordable units are often clustered in some of the state's least livable neighborhoods in terms of safety, environmental health, and public amenities. Residents of these neighborhoods find themselves located far from available jobs, and frequently have few transportation options to reach those workplaces. The concentration of poverty in such communities also aggravates social problems. At a minimum, state law should be revised to add strong enforcement provisions to the existing fair share affordable housing requirements, probably involving withholding state funding from communities not in compliance with regional goals. This measure would help distribute affordable housing more equitably throughout urban regions.

The growing emphasis on low-income homeownership by local governments is particularly troubling. Homeownership has some benefits in terms of introducing stable, long-term residents into neighborhoods. However, many low-income neighborhoods already have relatively high rates of homeownership and, more importantly, an emphasis on ownership ignores very low or extremely low income residents, many of whom work full-time jobs but do not have the financial resources or job stability to make long-term mortgage payments. An emphasis on homeownership favors the lower middle class while ignoring the need for decent, affordable rental housing which is better suited to the needs of the truly poor.

Livable communities must be affordable to the full range of residents who would live there. Diversity of racial, ethnic, and economic groups is widely seen as increasing the vitality of urban places, and as one of California's great strengths. So the question becomes how to ensure a variety of affordable housing options in California communities.

### Potential Solutions

There is no magic answer to this question, but a number of policy directions hold promise. Among these:

- lowering zoning and regulatory barriers in many areas to denser development, multifamily construction, a variety of unit types in

the same development, mixed-income housing, and creation of second units on existing single-family lots

- expanding support for nonprofit housing providers, such as tax credits, loan pools, and direct financing by local governments
- establishing state and regional affordable housing trust funds to assist worthy housing development proposals
- strengthening inclusionary housing requirements by state, county, and city governments (requiring builders to include a certain percentage of affordable units within each development), and providing these units to a greater percentage of very low income residents
- strengthening regional fair-share affordable housing apportionment by providing state financial incentives to communities that effectively take action to promote affordable housing, and conditioning other state funds on local compliance
- carefully using the redevelopment powers of local governments to assemble land and provide infrastructure for appropriately sited, affordable housing projects as well as for other urban revitalization purposes

Extensive political and economic debates exist regarding most of these policies. To date, inclusionary zoning, municipal loans to nonprofit developers, and low income housing tax credits have been perhaps the most effective state and local government programs promoting affordable housing in the state, along with Section 8 vouchers and other federal assistance. However, these state and local programs typically reach low to moderate-income residents rather than the very low-income individuals who need housing assistance the most. The increasing emphasis on homeownership rather than rental housing likewise misses the very poor. Consequently, policies and programs to make housing available to very low-income individuals and families are the most urgently needed.

One question frequently raised is whether growth management policies will lead to higher housing prices. Economic theory suggests this possibility if such policies limit the supply of new housing, impose increased regulatory burdens on developers, or cause homebuilders to switch to larger, more profitable homes. However, the available evidence seems to indicate that such effects can vary widely depending on how growth controls are designed. One study by Landis (1991) found that housing was in fact more affordable in some growth control cities than in corresponding pro-growth counterparts.

The lesson here appears to be that growth management policies should be designed with the goal of maintaining affordability and combined with other initiatives such as urban infill policies, inclusionary zoning, and financial incentives to nonprofit affordable housing developers. Certain simplistic growth control policies should also be avoided because of their potential effects on housing prices. In particular, the approach of managing growth by simply downzoning land is clearly counterproductive to housing affordability as well as the goal of limiting the size of the urban footprint—the likely effect is simply that a smaller number of more expensive houses get built on larger lots.

## 8. Local Businesses, Retail, and Jobs are Lacking in Many Communities

Traditional California towns were built around local stores and businesses, which usually occupied prominent positions on "Main Street" at the center of the town. Neighborhood centers also contained small shops and restaurants near where people lived. Now, in an age of mass marketing and economic globalization, these neighborhood-serving retail businesses have been largely displaced by large malls and chain stores at the fringes of cities. Many, if not most, older downtown stores have gone out of business—especially shops providing food, home furnishings, or other common essentials which chain stores can supply more cheaply. Those retailers that do locate downtown are often specialty shops which don't offer many of the goods needed in daily life, and which don't draw local residents downtown as routinely as in the past.

This trend, combined with the general dispersion of land uses within suburban sprawl, causes a number of problems related to urban livability:

- the centers of cities and towns become sleepy, decaying areas with little vitality or attractiveness
- food stores and other basic retail shops are located far from where people live, requiring them to drive
- today's chain stores are far more generic and less oriented toward specific local or ethnic needs
- many of these new stores play no role in anchoring public spaces and helping create a civic identity
- jobs likewise are widely dispersed and offices are not located near homes and town centers

- stores and other businesses are often owned by distant corporations with little personal commitment and relationship to the community

A vibrant local economy is an important part of livable communities. Such an economy can take many forms, but is unlikely to contain as many large-scale land uses, regional malls, strip commercial districts, and absentee-owned businesses as at present.

### Potential Solutions

Potential policies to help develop a locally oriented economy include the following:

- loans and other assistance for locally owned businesses and start-ups
- requirements that large development projects designate space for grocery stores, other services, and locally serving retailers
- restrictions on the entry of chain stores, big-box retailers, and regional malls into the community
- steps to eliminate single-use zoning under which jobs have often been concentrated in power centers and business parks far away from homes, shops and transit
- fiscal reform to reduce the extent to which local governments pursue businesses likely to provide high local sales tax revenues, at the expense of other economic development objectives

Many objections will be raised to such policies, among them that they are an imposition on free markets and the rights of property owners to free use of their land. These objections can be partially responded to by pointing out that many forms of economic development and land use place large unseen costs on communities. For example, although regional malls and chain stores may offer lower prices to consumers and sales tax dollars to municipal coffers, they impose costs ranging from increased traffic to visual blight to the decline of traditional downtown shopping districts and the loss of a pedestrian-oriented urban environment. It should also be pointed out that precedents for zoning and other forms of public control over land use are well-established, and that landowners are themselves benefitting from many forms of public regulation, subsidy, and infrastructure investment.

## 9. Pollution, Toxics, and Declining Environmental Quality

A clean, healthy environment is something, which most Californians care deeply about. And much of the lure of suburban communities is that they appear to provide just that. Yet at the same time, the lifestyle associated with the state's new suburbs undermines environmental quality by leading to greater resource consumption, land consumption, and pollution. Both local air pollution emissions and greenhouse gas emissions rise with the increased mileage driven by suburban residents. Water consumption grows substantially in the suburbs as residents water lawns. Amounts of refuse per capita increase as residents adopt highly consumptive lifestyles. And ecological habitats are destroyed by low-density sprawl.

An environmental variable of great concern to many Californians is air quality. Throughout much of the 1980s and 1990s, the state made progress in cleaning up its air, under the impetus of federal and state air quality regulations which required catalytic converters and other emissions control equipment on motor vehicles, as well as many pollution abatement strategies in industry. However, the initial savings resulting from the introduction of a cleaner vehicle fleet have now leveled off and are being eroded by the increasing numbers of cars and trucks on the road and the increasing miles per capita being driven by Californians. Consequently, the Bay Area was declared out of attainment for clean air purposes in 1998 by the US Environmental Protection Agency, and Los Angeles likewise is slipping on its air quality commitments. Since motor vehicles account for approximately half of the emissions of many major air pollutants, more fundamental action to reduce driving appears needed, as well as additional pollution control strategies for industries, businesses, and homes.

**Table 2. Air Pollution Days of Ozone Standard Exceedance  
1995–1997 (Three Year Total)**

<u>County</u>	<u>Monitoring City and Site</u>	<u>State 1-Hr.</u>	<u>Federal 1-Hr.</u>	<u>Federal 8-Hr.</u>
Alameda	Livermore–Old 1st St.	25	9	13
Contra Costa	Concord–Treat Blvd.	12	3	8
Fresno	Fresno–1st St.	71	14	65
Fresno	Parlier	76	12	56
Kern	Arvin–Bear Mtn. Blvd.Edison	121	40	110
Kern	Gendora–Laurel	108	19	89
Los Angeles	Riverside–Rubidoux	147	72	89
Riverside	Folsom–Natoma St.	159	52	122
Sacramento	Sacramento–Del Paso Manor	48	8	33
Sacramento	Lake Gregory	32	5	19
San Bernadino	San Bernadino–4th St.	190	99	164
San Bernadino	Alpine–Victoria Drive	190	92	148
San Diego	Escondido–Valley Parkway	88	8	52
San Diego	Otay Mesa	17	1	12
San Diego	Paseo International	11	0	1
Santa Clara	San Jose–Piedmont Road	15	3	5

Source: California Air Resource Board

Freedom from exposure to toxic chemical pollutants is also extremely important to the long-term livability of California communities and the health of the state's residents. Toxics have been of particular concern to low-income communities in older urban areas, which are often populated by persons of color. In fact, toxic pollution has been at the core of calls for "environmental justice." Stronger steps to protect these communities from environmental hazards are needed in the state. Better monitoring of existing state and federal standards is one good starting place, and specific programs to clean up "brownfield" sites can also help.

### Potential Solutions

Potential environmental policy initiatives that particularly benefit quality of life in the state's communities include the following:

- aggressive enforcement of state and federal air quality legislation, combined with the transportation and land use reforms discussed previously to reduce pollution from motor vehicles
- similar enforcement of state and federal water quality legislation as well as cooperative processes to protect and restore river systems and estuaries
- expanded monitoring of toxic waste problems, cleanup of contaminated brownfield sites, and enforcement of relevant state and federal statutes
- local efforts to restore ecological features such as creeks, rivers, shorelines, ridgelines, greenways, and wildlife habitat, reconnecting communities with their natural landscapes
- growth management policies to protect habitat and open space near cities and towns from development

Well-established state and federal programs exist concerning air, water, and toxics problems. Although these can be strengthened and their monitoring and enforcement improved, new programs and policies are needed that support more fundamental changes in land use, transportation, and resource use. Instead of trying to clean up pollution after the fact, these programs can address many underlying causes of environmental problems. Reducing motor vehicle use, for example, is essential to improving air quality, although it is not now prioritized within air pollution control efforts. More aggressive efforts are also needed to restore land and ecosystems previously contaminated or degraded. Such programs can provide many benefits for the livability of California communities. For example, the restoration of urban creeks and rivers in cities such as San Luis Obispo and Napa has yielded a new source of civic pride, identity and connection to nature. The creation of additional wildlife corridors, recreational greenways, parks, and ecological preserves can likewise be a great asset to the long-term livability of California communities.



## 10. Inadequate Governmental Institutions

"Many of the problems stemming from growth—traffic, air pollution, suburban sprawl, crowded facilities, declining services—can be traced to the state's failure to set clear policies for conservation and development. The state has failed to anticipate problems, plan ahead, and provide the fiscal resources to effectively address the challenges brought by rapid population growth, increasing social diversity, and physical development." —Senate Urban Growth Policy Project, 1991

Although all of the previous trends seriously compromise quality of life in the state, perhaps the biggest threat to the livability of California communities is a history of nearly 20 years of state inaction on urban growth management. In contrast to other states such as Oregon, Washington, Vermont, New Jersey, Florida, and Maine, there has been no effective leadership on these issues at the state level in California. Such efforts that have been mounted have lacked sufficient political and institutional commitment to achieve results.

Regional governments, in turn, are also relatively weak in the state and are hampered by the lack of state-level support (Pincetl, 1994). The regional agencies that do exist are often single-purpose functional planning agencies without a mandate to address overall regional development, or else voluntary councils of governments without any statutory authority to influence important policy areas such as land use. Efforts to strengthen regional planning frameworks have not met with much success, in large part because they have failed to receive support in Sacramento. For example, efforts to establish stronger regional planning frameworks in the Bay Area, led by State Sen. John Knox in the 1960s and the Bay Vision 2020 Coalition in the early 1990s, narrowly failed to win approval in the legislature (Scott, 1985; Lydon, 1993).

The ability of California's local governments to take action to improve community livability has been hampered by the general fragmentation of local government in the state, and by fiscal limitations dating back to the passage of Proposition 13 in 1981. As one result of this initiative, local governments saw their revenue-raising abilities reduced and were forced to cut services at the same time that state government was increasing their responsibilities by cutting back its own financial support for social service and housing programs. Another result has been that California cities and towns often fall prey to a desperate struggle to attract tax base, in ways that work against good land use planning and long-term

regional and community quality of life. The result of this struggle is the counterproductive pattern known as "fiscalization of land use," in which local governments compete for land uses such as regional malls and auto dealerships which produce high sales tax revenue, regardless of their desirability for local planning or quality of life purposes.

In its well-known 1995 report, *Beyond Sprawl*, a coalition including the Bank of America concluded that "unchecked sprawl has shifted from an engine of California's growth to a force that now threatens to *inhibit* growth and degrade the quality of our life" (emphasis original). The Bank of America-sponsored study notes that

"Since the late 1970s, several efforts have been initiated to address the question of how to manage California's growth, but all have failed—some for lack of consensus, some for lack of engaged constituency, some simply because of bad timing."

In sum, California's political system is not well prepared to deal with growth in ways that promote the long-term livability of the state's communities. Institutional reform is needed and should be a top priority of state leaders in Sacramento. Unless this situation is addressed, California may become a less and less attractive place to live in the twenty-first century.

"California currently lacks the public and private institutions needed to make growth planning work. Whether because of disinterest, political conflicts, or lack of resources, California's state government has receded from the business of planning for growth, as has the state's business community. Instead of planning organizations, regional councils of government have become information vendors, while functional agencies (such as transit districts or air quality boards) operate without reference to overall development policies. At the local level, cities regularly act without reference to the needs or plans of neighboring communities, and sometimes even without reference to their own long-term policies."

—John Landis, *How Shall We Grow* (1993)

### Potential Solutions

Potential policy directions for improving the state's institutional capability, many of which have been outlined previously by the Senate Urban Growth Policy Project (1991), the Association of Bay Area Governments (1998), and other groups, include the following:

- state adoption of growth management policy including land use planning goals, requirements, incentives, and performance standards
- establishment of a statewide land development and conservation agency with power to review local and regional plans, and to provide incentive funding for smart growth planning
- stronger regional planning frameworks able to implement state and regional goals
- subregional cooperation and planning where regional action is not possible
- strong and consistently implemented local General Plans
- stronger local area-planning processes to determine street patterns, housing densities, parks, and other elements of urban form in advance of development
- establishment of state or regional land banks to acquire conservation easements on agricultural land or open space threatened by development
- statewide fiscal reform—for example, to replace the two-thirds majority requirement for taxes and bonds with a simple majority and to rationalize revenue streams to state and local government
- statewide or regional revenue sharing to promote greater resource equity across jurisdictions, support central cities and first-ring suburbs, and reduce incentives for fiscalization of land use

Some of these policies are more likely to attract support than others. A perception that the state needs to undo the damage caused to California local governments by Proposition 13 and other tax limitation measures is now widely shared by local elected officials and citizens. Fiscal reforms may well be possible during the next administration. Also, cooperative regional and subregional planning efforts are emerging in several parts of the state, such as the San Diego area (coordinated by the San Diego Association of Governments), the Livermore Valley area, and the Marin/Sonoma 101 Corridor area.

Other institutional reforms will be more difficult. Establishment of a statewide growth management planning framework will require political

agreement on common goals from diverse and frequently antagonistic constituencies. The strengthening of regional planning frameworks will require that local governments at times subordinate local interests to regional or state goals.

Many have argued that regional government is impossible in California and that coordinated local action is desirable instead (e.g., Governor's Growth Management Council, 1993). However, the evidence to date indicates that voluntary coordination doesn't work well in the state at meeting the challenges of growth and that some stronger forms of metropolitan coordination are necessary. None of the voluntary metropolitan councils of governments has been particularly effective at establishing implementable regional policies or managing new urban development. The most successful example has been the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), which through skillful coordination of other local and regional authorities has gained many growth management responsibilities since 1988. SANDAG's "cross-acceptance" approach of coordinating goals and policies generated at both local and regional levels holds considerable promise. However, it still remains to be seen whether this process can manage the region's growth and promote the long-term livability of its communities.

Perhaps most difficult would be establishment of state or regional revenue-sharing, since this most directly affects local revenue-raising and spending abilities. However, as Orfield (1997) points out, a political coalition between central cities and older suburbs is possible to support pooling of revenue across metropolitan regions, since both of these groups will benefit. Such a coalition has made revenue-sharing possible in Minnesota since 1972. The Association of Bay Area Governments (1998) recommends the establishment of incentives for localities to share sales tax growth regionally or subregionally; state action to establish such incentives could be a relatively painless way of reducing divisive local competition over sales tax revenue. The Governor's Growth Management Council (1993) backed the idea of reallocating the growth in the local share of sales tax as a way to address fiscalization of land use.

Given the state's history of strong local governments and resistance to statewide planning, it will be especially important in California to have land use policies implemented at the local level, even while a statewide framework of common goals, requirements and incentives is established. As previously noted, this strategy has worked well in Oregon, where the state adopted a list of nineteen planning goals beginning in 1969, mandated that local governments incorporate them into local plans and establish UGBs, set up a state Land Conservation and Development Commission to

review local plans to ensure that they met these goals, and provided a variety of funds and incentives for local action. It is also a strategy that has been pursued more recently in Maryland under that state's "Smart Growth" legislation.

One of the most important lessons from Oregon and other states having some success in growth management is the need to develop a political coalition supporting common goals and objectives. In the Portland region, homebuilders, environmentalists, farmers, businesses, and citizens groups all support the region's UGB and statewide land use goals. Although this agreement was made possible in part by a general atmosphere of civility and concern for good government in Oregon, it has also been nurtured during the past 30 years by a variety of processes in which the different groups have had to get together and work with one another (Abbott, 1994, 1997; Knaap and Nelson, 1992; Porter 1997). Although politics in California is more divisive and not nearly as civil, the challenge appears to be to develop common understandings here, too, through continued dialogue between diverse interests.

#### Lessons for Effective Regional Growth Management

(adapted from Douglas R. Porter, *Managing Growth in America's Communities*  
Island Press, Washington D.C., 1997)

- A broad constituency of interests for regional action must be identified and built
- A clear objective must be defined for which a persuasive case for regional action can be made
- Effective regional strategic planning and implementation depend on the capability of saying "no" to individual local proposals if necessary; this power realistically comes only from state and/or federal authority for regional action
- Procedures must be established to make local governments accountable to regional interests, such as requiring conformity of local plans to regional goals
- Decision-making responsibilities must be shared in such a way that local governments retain major responsibilities for day-to-day development decisions

## **Conclusion: Towards More Livable Communities for California**

Community livability is one of the most important goals a state can seek. There is no single strategy to achieve this result. Rather, an interlocking set of initiatives in areas such as population, transportation, land use, environmental quality, housing, and urban design can help promote livable communities. Faced with the prospect of extremely rapid population growth over the next fifty years, California can either take conscious action to preserve and enhance the livability of its communities, or watch them become less attractive, convenient, safe, pleasant, and equitable for many residents.

Meeting livability needs will require the state's governmental jurisdictions, political leaders and businesses to move beyond parochialism and self-interest to seek common goals and take collective action. Carefully designed, such initiatives can also ensure that state and local economic health is enhanced. The sheer size of the state and the diversity of its communities and special interests would seem to work against public action of this sort, and indeed have for decades. Yet quality of life and community livability issues concern large numbers of Californians from all economic, racial, and ethnic groups and provide a fertile base for building a broad-based political coalition that can manage growth more effectively.

Table 3. Threats to Community Livability in California and Policy Options

<b>Problem</b>	<b>Leading Policy Options</b>	<b>Status and Issues</b>
Rapid population growth	Public education on overpopulation issues Strong support for family planning	Politically charged; frustration with population growth has been primarily channeled into anti-immigrant initiatives
Traffic congestion, lack of alternatives to automobile use and solo commuting	Pricing incentives Transit-oriented development Improve transit, bike and pedestrian options	Parking charges most promising near-term step Progress has been slow; state and regional support needed Operating funds for transit are a particular problem; progress is being made post-ISTEA in promoting bike and pedestrian planning
Loss of open space, farm land, and wilderness	Urban growth boundaries Agricultural easements Proactive local open space/park acquisition	Must be adopted in conjunction with infill policies and incentives Used successfully in places like Marin County Increasingly pursued by localities and nonprofits; funding needed
Central city decline; growing regional disparities	Public investment in downtown areas Brownfields redevelopment Regional tax-sharing	A strategy traditionally used in many of the state's urban areas Government action often needed to assemble land, deal with toxics Politically difficult but benefits both central cities and older suburbs
Lack of community vitality and a "sense of place"	Require town centers in new development Historic preservation Better urban design, civic art Restoration of significant ecosystem elements	Requires local/regional planning initiative, master planning Increasingly valued locally Many revisions needed to local codes, design review, state and federal incentive structures, developer practices
Crime and safety	Add housing/entertainment downtown to put people on the street Improved urban design ("eyes on the street")	A strategy being pursued in many cities; state/city assistance often required to ensure a mix of affordable units Depends heavily on local planning oversight
Lack of local businesses, retail, and jobs in many communities	Discourage big-box retail and mall development Promote mixed-use development	Politically controversial; fiscalization of land use encourages these Increasingly being done, but often difficult to finance

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