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## Smartly plan our way out of oil addiction

By Warren Karlenzig

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 Oil reached a historic high price of nearly \$127 a barrel earlier this week, and average gas prices are soon expected to spike to more than \$4 a gallon. Meanwhile, San Jose's public transit ridership, telecommuting and commuting by bike or walking remain in the bottom half of the nation's largest 50 cities.

The end of the cheap-oil era should provide San Jose and other urban centers unprecedented opportunities to reimagine and redirect community design and development so that its daily needs require less driving. Without significant changes, we'll crash not only our economy, but our health and our planet. In California, transportation accounts for 41 percent of the state's greenhouse gas emissions, primarily from cars and light trucks.

### Driving solo

Between the late 1970s and 2001, average U.S. vehicle miles traveled per person rose more than 150 percent. Today the vast majority of Americans drive alone to work every day (77 percent in San Jose), drive their children to school, drive to go shopping, and drive and drive and drive.

Analysts at Shell and the chief executive of BMW predict that global oil supply will not keep up with demand beginning in two to 17 years, causing gas prices to reach unknown levels.

Not surprisingly, decades of cheap gas have had a devastating impact on America's landscape. We

jettisoned the best ideas of urban planning, including dense, walkable cities with shared public spaces.

But driving in America is not inevitable. More than 60 percent of New Yorkers commute by taking public transit, walking or biking. More than 40 percent of residents of San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Boston do the same. In Boston, 13 percent of commuters daily reap the benefits of the world's oldest form of exercise: walking.

What works for older, denser cities is possible in the rest of the nation. Look at Denver. Five years ago, less than 5 percent of its residents used public transit, a rate similar to San Jose's 4 percent ridership in 2006.

After Denver metro area voters in 2004 approved the largest public transit financing ballot measure in the nation's history, a new light-rail line helped the city increase light-rail ridership more than 79 percent. Denver is on track to reaching its goal of 20 percent to 30 percent transit ridership, according to Mayor John Hickenlooper, who helped convince some 30 metro communities to back the forward-looking initiative.

The biggest step communities can take to overcome our driving addiction is to mandate higher density and mixed-use development. This will curb the unbridled exurban subdivision and mall sprawl that forces auto use for every perceived need.

Mixed-use development provides a variety of homes, jobs, shopping and parks in urban or suburban neighborhoods so people can live, work and play without necessarily driving.

### Green development

The U.S. Green Building Council, creators of the

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wildly successful Leadership in Energy and Environment Design green building standards, will soon launch a Neighborhood Development pilot program. The program will certify developments as being more energy efficient by rating factors including density, access to public transit and walkability.

Such creative solutions can help mitigate climate change while reinvigorating the economy. Viable options to driving cut the percentage of income people spend on gas, while stanching the flow of billions of dollars to regimes in the Middle East, Venezuela and other nations. Reducing gas taxes for the summer, on the other hand, will only delay coming to terms with our destructive national addiction.

Skyrocketing world oil prices and potential global supply shortages provide critical opportunities for federal, state and local policy makers to invest in changes to get us out of our cars and re-connect our communities.

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