

Urban sprawl is the real problem

To address climate change, elected officials must stand up to land speculators

BY MARK DEMPSEY

At the Global Climate Action Summit in San Francisco in September, California's political leaders reaffirmed their commitment to clean energy and Gov. Jerry Brown announced the state would achieve carbon neutrality by 2045.

But they neglected to focus on walking or biking. Developing more compact, pedestrian-friendly communities can reduce carbon emissions, and also free people from having to own a car.

Local officials continuing to support sprawl and land speculation is not a hopeful sign, either. Sprawl encourages longer commutes, and requires more highways and other infrastructure, which costs twice as much to develop in outlying developments than in compact infill projects.

Though the Sacramento region has 20 years worth of unbuilt infill land, local agencies are moving to make even more outlying land available for "greenfield" development. In February, the Sacramento Local Agency Formation Commission voted 4-3 to expand Elk Grove's urban boundary by more than 1,000 acres, despite plenty of vacant land within the city's current boundary. (Environmental groups have sued to stop the expansion.)

Barbara Leary, a candidate this year for Folsom City Council, said local planning is so dysfunctional that even if Folsom abandoned its expansion south of U.S. 50, land speculators would be able to get Elk Grove, Rancho Cordova or the county to annex the land and get their developments approved that way.

Speculators can purchase (or more likely option) outlying agricultural land

for a few thousand dollars an acre, then sell it to builders for hundreds of thousands of dollars once the land is approved for development. The Internal Revenue Service doesn't even tax these outrageous profits if the speculators

put the money into income-producing property such as malls and apartments.

In Germany, however, developers must sell outlying land to local governments at its agricultural land value, then buy it back at the development land price. All that profit benefits the public rather than a small plutocracy of speculators. And Germany has nice infrastructure, a solar program that's ahead

of schedule and free tuition even for foreign students at its universities.

Sacramento apparently can't handle homelessness, but our political class can produce a subsidy for land speculators at the drop of a hat. Land use is the nexus of local political malfeasance. In a betrayal of public interest, Sacramento County supervisors Susan Peters and Sue Frost voted for the Elk Grove expansion as LAFCo commissioners.

More of these sprawl-producing developments are cued up for possible approval. The climate effects of sprawl are roughly double the pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use alternative.

Believe it or not, the real estate market actually pays premiums for pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods. But as long as we give speculators the money that might go into civic improvements, we get nearer to the precipice of climate disaster. □



Mark Dempsey of Orangevale is a retired technical writer and real estate agent who served on a Sacramento County planning advisory council.

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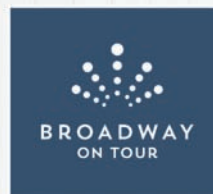
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