

GAINING INDEPENDENCE FROM OUR CARS

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BYLINE: TANYA NARATH

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The news is not encouraging for Sonoma County commuters.

A recent Press Democrat article informed us that we have the most cars per capita of any of the nine Bay Area counties. The North Bay Business Journal just published results from a survey conducted by the North Bay Council which found that nine out of 10 employees at polled companies drive alone to work.

Why should we be concerned about these statistics? Because they indicate that we are missing a tremendous opportunity for improved quality of life for Sonoma County residents.

The benefits of replacing some of our reliance on driving with alternative modes of transportation are many -- improved health, decreased traffic congestion, fewer parking headaches and traffic accidents, consumer savings, increased mobility for non-drivers, energy conservation, decreased pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, more efficient use of our limited land.

In the North Bay Council survey, 50 percent of those responding indicated they would prefer to use alternatives -- rail, carpooling, bus, walking or bicycling -- to get to work.

So the question is, how do we get from where we are today to a place where we have more viable transportation options to choose from?

Solutions to these challenges can be found in the most unlikely places. In 1992, the Denver Regional Council of Governments recommended that the region invest in a transit system rather than more highways as a key strategy to combat its ever-increasing sprawl and traffic congestion. Since then, Denver, with funding from sales tax measures, has invested aggressively in implementing an integrated transit system consisting of light and commuter rail and rapid bus routes.

An important element in the success of Denver's strategy is the associated change in land-use decisions being embraced in the region.

Rather than continuing to sprawl, new housing and business construction is being concentrated in mixed-use, transit-oriented developments. When Denver finishes its expanded transit system in 2016, half of the region's new residents -- 550,000 people -- are planned to be living and working within walking distance or a short ride from a transit stop. One quarter of all rush-hour commuters are expected to use the rail and rapid bus routes.

The situation in Sonoma County is obviously very different from Denver -- our four-lane highway and population under 500,000 are small compared with Denver's 12-lane expressways and population of 2.5 million people.

However, Denver illustrates some key principles that we should consider as we look to the future of getting around in Sonoma County. In fact, some of these principles are already being applied in cities across the county.

For example, several Sonoma County cities -- Cotati, Petaluma and Windsor -- are embracing smart growth principles to build livable, walkable communities close to their SMART rail stations.

Local organizations like the Sonoma County Bicycle Coalition and the SRJC Neighborhood Association are promoting changes that will make our streets safer and more enjoyable for walking and bicycling. Voters in Marin and Sonoma counties will vote in 2006 on the funding necessary to bring commuter rail to the North Bay. These are essential first steps in establishing a new transportation infrastructure for our future.

To those who are skeptical that we will ever let go of our devotion to our cars and feel investments in public transportation are a poor use of taxes, there is abundant evidence to the contrary.

Like Denver, cities that have accompanied their investments in transit with supportive land-use policies have experienced significant growth in total transit ridership. They are also seeing economic growth as new businesses and younger workers are attracted to the affordable housing and vibrant lifestyle of urban villages that are viewed as desirable alternatives to suburban sprawl.

Over many years, our land use and transportation policies have resulted in a car-dependent Sonoma County. To break free of this dependency will take time, policy changes and investments.

Rather than discouraging us, the recent news on cars per capita should be viewed as further incentive to invest in an integrated transportation system that provides Sonoma County commuters with convenient, comfortable and affordable alternatives for their daily commute. Tanya Narath is a Santa Rosa resident and the executive director of the Leadership Institute For Ecology and the Economy.