

## **Viewpoint: Smart Growth leads to more road congestion, increases community's pollution woes**

**Joel Schwartz and Wendell Cox**

Sunday, August 10, 2003

---

A recent special report in *The Californian* argued that urban sprawl represents the greatest threat to the valley's air quality, and that "Smart Growth" urban planning would reduce the road congestion and air pollution caused by suburban development.

But that's misdiagnosing the problem and prescribing dangerous medicine. Technology is improving air quality more rapidly, effectively, and cheaply than can urban planning. Misnamed smart growth would actually increase gridlock and smog, while putting home ownership out of reach for more Kern County residents.

Smart growth packs more cars and more emissions into a given land area, increasing both congestion and air pollution. Average work commute times are actually highest in the densest cities.

Fortunately, technology is breaking the link between air pollution and driving. Vehicles built to current Air Resources Board requirements will be more than 90 percent cleaner over their lifetimes when compared with the average car now on the road. Thus, even if the valley's population doubles during the next 25 years, total automobile emissions will decline at least 80 percent as the fleet turns over to these 21st century vehicles.

While technology rapidly reduces valley emissions, smart growth plans will be busy raising home prices. People across the state move to the valley because it is one of the last bastions of affordable housing in California. But research shows that urban growth limits and similar smart growth measures drive up housing prices. In the Bay area, San Jose's smart growth policies helped drive up home prices an astronomical 936 percent from 1976 to 2001. And Portland, Ore., a smart growth pioneer, quickly went from being one of the most affordable to one of the least affordable cities.

Smart growth plans pack people into high-density neighborhoods. But is that what consumers and home buyers want? Developers don't force consumers to choose "sprawl" against their will. In a dynamic and competitive housing market, developers have a tremendous incentive to find out what combination of amenities will most appeal to home buyers. If people were clamoring to live in high-rise apartments or condos, developers would build them. Right now, most people, especially those in Bakersfield and the valley, want single-family homes with a bit of land in the front and back yard.

We use to call this the American Dream. Now wanting to own a home with a yard is called sprawl and is bad for us?

People should be free to choose the lifestyles they desire -- whether sprawling suburbs or high-density "mixed-use" neighborhoods and should bear the costs for their decisions. And they do. New-home buyers generally pay in the sale price for all of the road, sewer and water infrastructure for direct service to their property.

Smart growth is a dumb choice unless we want higher housing prices. Bakersfield's air quality is going to be improved by technology and getting high-polluting cars off the road, not by building high-density housing projects.

*Joel Schwartz is a senior fellow at the Reason Foundation and works in Sacramento. Wendell Cox is a transportation and demographics consultant and spent three terms on the Los Angeles County Transportation Commission.*