If you build it, they will come: Americans want smart growth alternatives to conventional transportation

Longer commutes, clogged streets, endless traffic delays—Americans want alternatives to the daily transportation grind. Smart growth land-use strategies, also known as location-efficient development or “new urbanism,” place a premium on what Americans value: shorter trips to and from the office and other destinations, opportunities to travel conveniently without having to drive, pedestrian-friendly sidewalks, and amenities like restaurants, shops, and libraries within walking distance of their homes. These options can save people thousands of dollars a year by cutting the cost of transportation—the second-biggest household expense. Even better, these quality of life improvements have significant benefits for the environment.

Unfortunately, the traditional methods of computer modeling currently used to guide land-management and transportation project development decisions are keeping communities locked into sprawl by severely under-predicting the value of these safer, healthier smart growth alternatives. NRDC has identified several critical problems with the current modeling system, as well as a set of recommendations for correcting the inaccuracies—and creating more livable communities.

The Benefits of Smart Growth
Residents of communities designed using smart growth strategies drive as little as one-fifth as much as their counterparts in conventional sprawl developments.¹ This reduced dependence on automobiles means less money spent on gas, increased outdoor activity like walking and cycling, improved rates of public transit ridership, and less global warming pollution released into the air. In fact, if all new communities were designed using smart growth strategies we could slash...
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emissions by about 595 million metric tons after 10 years, or 10 percent of total U.S. emissions of global warming pollution.²

There are also substantial economic benefits: transportation costs can be reduced by at least $600 a month, and property values can increase as a result of greater attractiveness and lower driving expenses. The overall benefits are so great that if all new residential construction in the United States over the next 10 years were built to resemble existing smart growth projects, the economic benefit to the economy would exceed $2 trillion—about 20 percent of one year's gross domestic product.³

Poor Modeling Causes Roadblocks
The computerized models currently used to evaluate traffic problems and influence transportation planning decisions are biased, vastly understating the advantages of smart growth development solutions while also exaggerating the benefits of roadway expansion and construction. These models provide decision makers with misleading data that encourage traditional sprawl development by underestimating the benefits of smart growth alternatives, making them look economically less attractive than they are. Moreover, the modeling bias creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: planning techniques predict ever-increasing vehicle traffic demand, which justifies automobile-oriented transportation policy and land-use projects, which then leads to increased vehicle traffic.

Building Better Communities
How a community’s land is developed largely determines the travel patterns of its residents. Models should accurately assess the following key determinants of vehicle ownership and distance driven as a first critical step toward creating safer, more efficient, and more accessible communities.

- **Density**—the number of residents, households, or to a lesser extent, jobs in an area.
- **Regional location and accessibility**—the proximity of a building site to a larger region's jobs, shops, services, and homes.
- **Transit service quality**—the frequency of bus or train service within walking distance of homes and businesses.
