

## OP-ED

### **Rick Longinotti: New Urbanists planning for a better future**

When I was a kid, my favorite attraction at Disneyland was the Autopia — short for automobile utopia — in Tomorrowland. You could drive a mini-car with a gasoline motor. You could get the feel of accelerating and steering. Tomorrowland inspired me with dreams about the future. Back home, in my play with wood blocks and Dinky cars, I tried to recreate what I saw in Tomorrowland, complete with elevated freeways. I confess that I still feel exhilaration traveling on the elevated freeway where Highway 280 drops into San Francisco.

Nowadays, thinking about the future is a topic a lot of us would rather avoid, partly due to the sour consequences of all those freeways. We associate freeways with what George Bush called our "addiction to oil," with carbon dioxide soaring to unprecedented levels, and sea level rising to inundate our beloved coastal areas. Who knew that Autopia would become Dystopia?

But thinking about the future doesn't have to be dismal. Since global climate change and escalating oil prices have woken up many of us to the need to change the status quo, we have an unprecedented opportunity to get a few things right that have been broken for a long time. One of those things is the way we have built our towns and cities.

In the wake of World War II, development took place that did not reflect the wisdom accrued over centuries about how to design our towns and cities. Prior to automobile-based development, many American towns, and some cities, created attractive commercial and civic spaces, and cohesive, walkable neighborhoods. People knew their neighbors and their local merchants, and many needs for sociability and support were met in the neighborhood.

The auto changed all that. The freedom initially afforded by the automobile has ironically debilitated our freedom. For many of us, owning an auto is compulsory if we want to get to work, to buy what we need, or to engage in social life without serious inconvenience. For those who don't drive, either because of poverty, infirmity or youth, car-centered development has reduced access to life's necessities.

The costs of this compulsory consumption are huge. Not only are we paying at the pump, at the car dealer and the insurance company, we pay innumerable hidden costs for the infrastructure that supports car use, including the enormous amount of real estate devoted to parking. Ivan Illich once estimated that if we include all the hours we spend working to pay for our cars and infrastructure, we travel at less than five miles per hour.

The ultimate consequence of auto dependency is global warming. Fuel efficiency improvements do not compensate for the fact that people are driving farther, as housing and jobs are spread apart. In our state, vehicle miles traveled is increasing at twice the rate of our population.

For the past 30 years, a reform movement of urban planners and architects, known as New Urbanism, has sought to reverse the decline of community life that characterizes sprawl. In the process, they have provided us with the key to unchain ourselves from the automobile. They have transformed land-use planning to create neighborhoods where people live close to work, school, shopping and recreation. Another principle is transit-oriented development, where a transit stop becomes a

neighborhood hub, with commercial and social activity. This is particularly relevant as our county will soon own the rail line, with its potential for transit.

In a forum May 22, members of leading New Urbanist town design firms in Northern California will outline the principles of land-use design that make for walkable and transit-friendly communities. Christopher Pizzi, from Solomon ETC, and Lois Fisher of Fisher Town Design, will describe what communities like ours are already doing to create a sustainable and socially equitable future.

Joining them is Amanda Eaken, of the Natural Resources Defense Council. She will talk about SB 375 under consideration in Sacramento, that will require counties seeking transportation funding to have land-use policy in place that encourages a reduction in car trips. Moderator is Mark Deming, Assistant Planning Director of Santa Cruz County.

Designs for a Green Future: The Transportation-Land Use Connection, 7-9 p.m. Thursday, May 22, Live Oak Grange, 1900 17th Ave., near Capitola Road.

Rick Longinotti lives in Santa Cruz.