

smog and traffic noise. With the windows rolled up and the air-conditioning turned on, they focus on the radio news, music, or their cell phones. They may taste or smell only their morning coffee steaming in the cup holder by their side. They feel vibrations from the road only indirectly, by extension through the machine. They fill their time with an assortment of ritual activities, separated from a particular place, encircled by the car. But the isolated rituals of freeway driving are becoming ever less satisfying.

Life in Los Angeles depends on both access and mobility, both surface and freeway driving. People need great mobility for a choice of jobs and a selection of places to earn a living. On the other hand, they also need quick and convenient access to stores, parks, and schools. Mostly we have tried to achieve this legitimate aim by using only one limited means of transport: the private automobile. Although the region is, bit by bit, relieving traffic with a light-rail network and a beginning subway, the familiar problem remains. To ease this problem, higher densities are essential.

NEED FOR DENSITY

A change of land-use policies is needed to attain higher densities. Los Angeles is still spreading outward in vast tracts of detached houses at suburban densities of 5 to 7 dwelling units per acre (du/ac) (12–17 du/ha). At the same time, people are recognizing geographical and commute-time limits. Urban designers have long called for higher densities as a way to support diversified transportation and to bring workplace and home closer together. And recently, public officials have joined the call. Los Angeles county supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky has been quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* as saying, “There’s less and less land for development. . . . What people have historically come to Los Angeles for is a home with a backyard. . . . But that’s not the reality anymore.” Higher-density housing, he adds, is the “wave of the future.”³

The American dream of “a ranch house on a ranch” not only increases the costs in commuting time and pollution but aggravates other problems as well. Los Angeles has long since used up most of its easily developed flat land, including some of our most productive farmland. A NASA satellite study reports that, though cities account for just 3 percent of U.S. continental land area, the land they occupy could produce as much food as the 29 percent of land area now used for agriculture.⁴ The loss of fertile soil under cities increases the pressure for production on less fertile soil, leading to overuse of fertilizers and other detrimental environmental effects.

Los Angeles suburbs have now spilled onto mountain, marsh, and desert where growth is costly to maintain. When developers cut into the slopes of surrounding hills, they cause a number of environmental problems. The disturbance of natural water-flows leads to seasonal flooding and mudslides. Wildlife is displaced, pressed ever further into a diminishing wilderness. Wildfires, once an integral part of nature, now regularly threaten neighborhoods.

Building on marshlands upsets essential ecosystems. Intruding into coastal marshes not only creates flood-control problems but also destroys wetland habitat essential to both land and ocean wildlife. The consequences extend far into the future and beyond the local setting.

As Los Angeles moves beyond semidesert into still more arid surroundings, development becomes ever more costly to maintain. Massive amounts of water are imported not only for households but to sustain gardens and golf courses as well. Air-conditioning for comfort in the desert heat uses excessive amounts of electricity.

Denser growth is not only desirable but also inevitable. Under the pressures of increasing population, Los Angeles is in some older parts already moving toward higher densities. New multiple-family housing, sometimes in combination with street-front shops,