

Should El Camino Be More Urban, European?

BY JOHN WALLACE

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The new El Camino Real envisioned by Joint Venture Silicon Valley Network, in a report last year represents a good start, but the planning process needs a bolder direction for the next century.

Our region's grand thoroughfare deserves a design that is more European and, frankly, more urban. Unless the Peninsula builds up along El Camino, creating a city-like residential and commercial artery, we risk a declining quality of life, with lengthening communities and congestion, along with the loss of quiet suburban neighborhoods and open spaces.

European cities often delight Americans with their street life, commerce and general hubbub. In such places, the urban experience is on a human scale, with mid-rise buildings of three to five stories that gather together housing, shopping, entertainment and transportation, along with work and education.

If the streets of Europe's most popular cities have life, it's because life has been brought to the street. In these cities, "the street" is a place for window-shopping and people watching – because moderate-density development encourages such activities.

Stores and eateries are built out to the sidewalk, giving passerby a rich sense of choices and urban excitement. Traffic congestion? In European cities there's plenty, and fortunately there's also a subway or tram to get you there faster.

But what we enjoy abroad often eludes us at home. In our predominately suburban nation, we instinctively distrust many aspects of city life. We automatically tend to confuse crowds with crowding, traffic with congestion.

It's hard for many of us to imagine a pleasantly urbanized, exciting El Camino of condominiums, offices, apartments, stores and schools. Yet this kind of development is the only way to relieve pressure on single-story, single-family-home-neighborhoods while also alleviating our housing crisis, accommodating economic growth and preventing sprawl.

The Peninsula's former bedroom communities are coalescing into a major metropolitan corridor. Gone are the days when Palo Alto was just a suburb, and El Camino simply a street.

With many more jobs than people, headquarters of one of the world's largest corporations and a prestigious, ever-growing university, Palo Alto is a small metropolis and El Camino is a regional thoroughfare.

The natural geography and growth of the Peninsula make El Camino the logical place to encourage

density. Here, rather than trying to obscure and soften street life with trees, bike paths, park-like expanses and other suburban amenities, we need to think urban. This means a Grand Boulevard worthy of Europe, where people and, yes, traffic, naturally congregate.

In all of Santa Clara and San Mateo counties, only the El Camino corridor can easily accommodate significant growth. The region's highest-density development has always been along El Camino. The corridor is accustomed to traffic. El Camino links virtually every downtown between San Jose and San Francisco, along with major shopping centers from Stanford to Hillsdale and Tanforan.

As for dealing with traffic congestion, the El Camino corridor may be the nation's best location for mass transit. Public-transportation systems work best in areas of elongated high-density development, such as the Peninsula, where Caltrain runs blocks from El Camino. The new Baby Bullets have spurred a 15 percent jump in overall ridership. Caltrain plans to electrify the line and extend it to San Francisco's financial district.

A midrise, European-style boulevard lined with shops, cafes and businesses would give the region a place to grow. While developing a vibrant street scene at the center of the Peninsula, we can take better care of the natural areas at the periphery. For example, as we add density to El Camino, why not pull development away from riparian areas such as San Francisquito Creek and gradually widen these lands into open space?

Meanwhile, a more urban and cosmopolitan El Camino could accommodate everything from medical facilities to apartments, condominiums and senior housing, the very developments that frequently "have no place to go" in today's Peninsula.

California will keep growing. Our population will rise like water in a reservoir. But without a spillway, the dam will burst and flood us with sprawl. Since my birth in 1947, the state's population has grown from 9 million to 37 million.

And we can't even say all this growth happened in a single lifetime, because, hey, I'm not dead yet. California now has more people than Canada, and within two decades may have a larger population than France. California will continue to be the destination of choice for those escaping failed economic, political and social systems. The region's growth engine will periodically rev, whether it's biotechnology, nanotechnology or something else.

It is no accident that Stanford is aggressively pursuing its share of California's stem-cell research money. Bioscience is likely to pay off in a multiplier effect, with each campus position creating one or two other jobs.

Where are these people going to live, work and shop? Where are our children going to live? Are they going to commute preposterous distances? Do we have to sacrifice California's remaining pristine and undeveloped lands to house them? With an economic rebound, should we really narrow El Camino from three lanes to two, as proponents of more suburbanized Palo Alto advocate?

This area deserves a grander vision, unfolding on a grander timescale. We need to think in terms of a 100-year plan for El Camino.

This means, among other things, realistically providing for the impacts of growth along the urban corridor. For example, rezoning could mean a spike in property values. With planning and community buy-in, a projected windfall could be spread among property owners, surrounding neighborhoods, parks and open-space preserves.

No urban-style design for El Camino can succeed without bold leadership. We need to think beyond our suburban roots to our urban future.



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