

San Jose leaders try to reverse urban sprawl

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Strip malls and low-rise office parks dominate the landscape of northern San Jose, but a long-term redevelopment plan could make over large swaths of the area along decidedly more urban lines.

Over the next three decades, the city wants to add more than 30,000 new homes and 80,000 jobs within walking distance of a Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority light-rail line on North First Street.

Planners, architects and environmentalists applauded the approach during a tour Saturday of recent developments exemplifying the model in the area. They argued that compact and transit-oriented building is among the most effective means of reducing driving, cutting greenhouse gas emissions and creating better functioning cities.

Many Bay Area cities are pursuing similar models, and these advocates say many more should do as the region struggles to absorb what the Association of Bay Area Governments predicts will be 1.6 million new residents over the next 25 years.

"There's so much opportunity to accommodate new growth in areas like this and put together all the pieces that make a complete community," said Michele Beasley, representative of the San Francisco planning group Greenbelt Alliance, which organized the tour for more than 50 people on the light-rail line. "We really see in the development of the First Street corridor how other (counties) and cities around the region could do in-fill development."

San Jose, the region's largest city, has a special responsibility for meeting the Bay Area's expanding population needs because past development patterns have left it with much underutilized land, City Councilman Sam Liccardo said.

"There are no cities in this region with the capacity for growth like San Jose," he said. "We need to think carefully now about how we plan for it, knowing that the suburban sprawl model is an environmental and fiscal dead end."

John Frith, representing the California Building Industry Association, has said in past interviews that there needs to be a balance between environmental aims and providing affordable housing. Infill alone cannot keep up with population growth, and there remains strong demand for affordable, single-family homes in suburban areas, he said.



San Jose largely developed along sprawling lines during the post-war period as a bedroom community subsequently supplemented with mostly one- and two-story office buildings. As a result, the city has long grappled with a housing and jobs imbalance, and with swelling traffic concerns, as residents drive in and out of the city for work, said Dennis Korabiak, program manager with the San Jose Redevelopment Agency.

The North San Jose Area Development Policy, established in 2005, attempts to address these challenges by loosening density and other restrictions on residential and commercial construction in the district, while requiring both to move forward together. The core area is about 600 acres, twice the size of San Francisco's Mission Bay redevelopment area.

The plan allows for nearly 27 million square feet of office, research and development, and retail space, within close proximity of 32,000 new housing units. Ideally, this will allow people to live, shop and play near where they work, making transit or walking preferable to driving, Korabiak said.

"When you have that type of density, you make it a lot more friendly for walking," he said. "The decision was, let's not build out anymore, let's build up."

San Jose ranked second with a score of 69 on the Greenbelt Alliance's latest Bay Area Smart Growth Scorecard. The list evaluated cities according to their current building policies (as opposed to existing developments and infrastructure) in areas like project density, urban growth boundaries and affordable housing. Petaluma and Napa bracketed the city at the top of the list, with scores of 70 and 65, respectively. The bottom three were Atherton, Belvedere and Hillsborough, respectively, earning a 3 and two zeros.

San Francisco ranked 19th with a score of 49.

The city has the region's highest concentration of office and residential towers along transportation lines. But many of the battles over long-term planning policies have centered on the conflict between meeting new housing needs in the city and preserving existing homes, neighborhood character and industrial businesses. Many slow-growth advocates argue that the flurry of residential and office construction that began with the dot-com boom has forced out longtime residents and small companies, and that policies to prevent it in the future are critical.

The draft plan for the Western SoMa district, an effort largely led by neighborhood groups, starts with the position that: "Proposed new land use development shall primarily serve the needs of existing residents and businesses. Citywide and regional needs are subordinate to existing local needs."

Taking an opposing view, Gabriel Metcalf, executive director of the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association, said the plan doesn't allow for appropriate height and density increases in the district, especially along areas of significant public transportation infrastructure like the Fourth Street corridor.

"The city is constantly tempted to turn its back on the region and only pay attention to protecting who's here now," he said. "The overriding environmental imperative of our age is to stop sprawl. We do that by concentrating growth inside already urbanized areas."

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