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San Jose Provides Model for Bay Area Growth and Transportation Needs

Posted By [Matthew Roth](#) On October 30, 2009 @ 11:30 am In [Bicycle Infrastructure](#), [LOS Reform](#), [Pedestrian Safety](#), [San Jose](#), [Silicon Valley Bicycle Coalition](#), [VTA](#) | [1 Comment](#)



Photo: [pbo31](#) ^[1]

In [our ongoing coverage](#) ^[2] of the adverse affects of [traffic engineers' over-reliance](#) ^[3] on automobile [level of service \(LOS\) measurements](#) ^[4], [we've examined how new amendments](#) ^[5] to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) would allow local jurisdictions greater freedom in choosing whether they want to develop their cities for cars or for transit, cycling, and livable streets. Simply put, if the CEQA amendments are codified, cities all over the state could become more like San Jose.

While San Francisco labors with the development of its [auto trip generation](#) ^[3] (ATG) metric and could spend a year or more setting a development impact fee that would go to improving transit, cycling and pedestrian safety, San Jose completed a citywide transportation environmental impact statement (EIS) in 2002 and adopted its vision for sustainable, transit-oriented growth in 2005 [\[PDF](#) ^[6]]. What's more, this transportation and land-use plan moves San Jose ahead of the curve compared to other cities in meeting the requirements under [AB 32](#) ^[7] (carbon reduction targets) and [SB 375](#) ^[8] (limiting sprawl).

"We want to grow up, not out," said Hans Larsen, Acting Director of San Jose's Department of Transportation (DOT), noting the city couldn't accommodate the 400,000 new residents expected by 2030 within San Jose's current boundaries by adding more sprawling developments and more traffic. "We had a policy conflict between our growth plan, which was really smart-growth, and our transportation management policies, which have historically been oriented toward providing enough capacity for cars."

Transportation Impact Policy 5-3 [\[PDF](#) ^[9]] outlines, in essence, two distinct visions for San Jose's growth, one that preserves the suburban characteristics of far-flung San Jose neighborhoods (LOS level D is still the limit), the other that targets high-density development and growth along transit corridors within designated Special Planning Areas (SPAs), primarily in the downtown and along the

light rail corridor in North San Jose. In SPAs, LOS is still measured, but if a new development or a transit-only or bicycle lane project were to degrade LOS below level D, the city has decided that this would be acceptable. As a result, along transit corridors in SPAs, the DOT has prioritized the development of bus and transit-only lanes, bicycle lanes, neighborhood traffic calming to reduce cut-through traffic, and pedestrian safety measures, no matter how bad automobile traffic becomes. If a new transportation project improves conditions for efficient, sustainable, and human-scale transportation, it gets priority.

The DOT conceived of the division between the two LOS classification zones for political reasons: they knew they wouldn't get the council votes needed for passage if they tried to push transit-oriented development on the suburbs. "We had political support from some of the council districts near the downtown areas for density and lots of transit, [but] it was a strategic move not to push it everywhere," said Manuel Pineda, Deputy Director of the San Jose DOT.

In essence San Jose DOT has codified the green transportation hierarchy, so that within these SPAs, pedestrian safety and accessibility is the top priority, followed by transit and bicycle capacity, with motorist convenience at the bottom. What's even more encouraging, the progressive transportation policy was promoted from within the agency, without the incessant hounding by advocates that is often required in other Bay Areas cities.

"They are adopting policies that are pretty forward-thinking and visionary when compared to other DOTs across the country," said [Silicon Valley Bicycle Coalition](#) ^[10] Executive Director Corinne Winter. "It's interesting that the city did this on their own; well-meaning people in the DOT started this. It's only come to the attention of the advocates recently."

Development Impact Fees and Protected Intersections

Because new development will inevitably bring additional car trips, no matter how well situated near transit, the DOT conceived of a development impact fee that is applied to improving pedestrian safety and the sustainable transportation network. In determining the impact fee, the DOT looked at how much, on average, developers traditionally spent on LOS mitigations to increase car capacity. This number, \$2,000-3,000 per auto trip generated by the new development, is assessed for developments that create 400 or less net new peak-hour trips. If the project will create more than 400 new peak-hour trips, a fee is determined in the process of environmental review.

Through the Strong Neighborhoods Initiative (SNI) started by former Mayor Ron Gonzales, communities located in the SPAs developed lists of neighborhood priorities, most of them related to transportation and livability. The auto-trip fees from new developments are then distributed by the DOT to meet the needs elaborated in the community's priority list.

In the process of creating this very strong link between new development and efficient transportation, the DOT designated Protected Intersections along transit corridors. At these intersections, no matter how bad auto LOS would degrade with a transportation or development project, the city will not widen the streets, soften turning radii, or otherwise add vehicle capacity. In fact, the only mitigations permissible are those that calm traffic further, improve transit and bicycle accessibility, or make pedestrian conditions safer. The DOT created an initial list of approximately twenty Protected Intersections when it completed the citywide transportation EIS and the public has added a handful more in subsequent negotiations with the DOT and City Council.

Because of the broader economic downturn, the policy has yet to realize the full benefits of using development fees to improve sustainable transportation. Four development projects in the SPAs, totaling more than 3,000 residential units, have been approved by the city since the plan was adopted, but none of them has started construction, according to Pineda. The project closest to completing its financing obligations, a residential development that would build on the existing parking lot at the San Jose Flea Market, will provide \$1.7 million in impact fees, much of which will go to improve streetscape and pedestrian conditions in a nearby commercial district as established in an SNI priority list.



BRT corridor currently. Photo: San Jose DOT.



BRT corridor as envisioned when development impact fees are applied to transit, bicycle, and pedestrian improvements. Image: San Jose DOT.

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- [5] we've examined how new amendments: <http://sf.streetsblog.org/2009/10/26/ca-poised-to-reform-auto-centric-level-of-service-environmental-rules/>
- [6] PDF: <http://sf.streetsblog.org/wp-content/upload1/SanAntonio.pdf>
- [7] AB 32: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_Warming_Solutions_Act_of_2006
- [8] SB 375: http://www.planningreport.com/tpr/?module=displaystory&story_id=1257&format=html
- [9] PDF: <http://sf.streetsblog.org/wp-content/upload1/protectedintersections.pdf>

[10] Silicon Valley Bicycle Coalition: <http://bikesiliconvalley.org/>

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