

EDITORIALS

California and its automobiles

If the state is serious about climate change, the car cannot continue to be king of the road.

FOR DECADES, California's landmark environmental law has worked in a decidedly un-environmental way.

Enacted in 1970, the California Environmental Quality Act, or CEQA, was supposed to create an environmental review process for building projects and, in theory at least, ensure that new developments did a minimum of harm to the communities where they were located.

In many ways, it has been successful. But one of the law's requirements is an analysis of a project's impact on transportation. And the way that provision works — the system set up to measure the impact on traffic — has paradoxically made it easier to build in the suburbs and harder to build in urban neighborhoods. The law has favored sprawl and penalized apartments in dense communities, offices near subway stops and even the creation of bike lanes — the very projects that California now realizes it needs in order to reduce its dependence on cars and cut the greenhouse gases responsible for global climate change.

Finally, state officials have released a proposal for a new way to measure transportation impacts, and it flips on its head the "car is king" thinking that has shaped California's development patterns for the last half-century and more. The change is required by a bill passed in 2013. The author, then-Sen. Darrell Steinberg, recognized that while other state laws and policies were requiring local governments to plan their housing and transportation systems to reduce driving, limit pollution and cut greenhouse gases, CEQA often worked against those mandates.

Under current CEQA rules, a project has a negative environmental impact if it would slow the speed of traffic or add to congestion. There are several major problems with this approach.

First, if you're measuring transportation impacts based only on how quickly cars can move, every solution will be geared toward moving cars faster. That often has translated into developers being required to add more lanes, synchronize traffic lights so cars don't have to slow down at intersections and make other car-centric changes that create streets that are uninviting or dangerous for cyclists and walkers. Plus, when motorists

are able to drive faster, they are more likely to drive more often and for longer distances, avoiding alternative modes of transportation and emitting more greenhouse gases.

The current approach also makes it harder to build new apartments, offices or shops in dense urban areas and along transit lines where it's easier to get around without a car. That's because the rules look at transportation only in terms of moving cars; if roads can't be widened or lanes added for cars, which is often impossible in built-out areas, then a project can be blocked. The same types of projects built way out on the undeveloped fringe typically won't face the same hurdles during approval because the roads in such areas aren't congested. Yet. But continued car-dependent sprawl eventually leads to more traffic, more congestion and more greenhouse gas emissions.

Under the proposed change, a project would be deemed to have a negative impact if it increased the number of cars on the road or created longer trips. (An example might be a mall built on the edge of suburbia with no transit access.) The solution, under this system, would be to find ways to reduce the need or desire to drive. That could mean providing transit passes to employees, charging for parking, funding crosswalks or improving sidewalks.

The new guidelines allow projects that are specifically designed to reduce vehicle trips, such as the creation of a new bike lane, to be exempted from lengthy transportation studies and shielded from legal challenges under CEQA. Projects such as an apartment complex built within a half-mile of a major transit stop also could escape lengthy study because they are likely to reduce car travel. Cities are expected to develop computer models to estimate how many vehicle trips a project would generate.

Since nothing with CEQA is easy or clear, the development of the new transportation analysis has been controversial. Some community groups worry that the switch will allow unchecked development that increases congestion and further clogs streets, worsening pollution.

California has set an ambitious target of reducing greenhouse gases 40% below their 1990 level by 2030. The state simply cannot reach that goal without a dramatic cut in emissions from cars and trucks, which are the largest source of greenhouse gases in the state. Increasing the number of electric cars on the road will help, but that alone won't suffice. California communities have to be redesigned to make it easier for people to walk, bike or take a bus. Changing CEQA is an important step toward that goal.



GOV. JERRY BROWN gives a brief on the Thomas fire and other wildfires.

No oil, less war

Re "Brown's Big Oil legacy," Opinion, Dec. 15

I strongly echo Jacques Leslie's plea that Brown take steps to reduce oil production and consumption side as well.

The state could take bigger strides on the consumption side as well. Indeed, with our Environmental Protection Agency chief dismantling his organization and our president made the U.S. the only country on Earth not fighting climate change, we need bold action to reenergize Americans who are wary of oil consumption.

If California were to outlaw the sale of fossil-fuel-powered cars by 2030, other states would follow. Thus we would have laid the ground for a clean nationwide transportation system. Importantly, helped the U.S. reclaim a leadership in this vital environmental battle.

What about it, Governor?

Leslie argues that Brown should cut back on oil extraction in California and that keeping it in the ground is the most powerful legacy he could leave behind.

There are at least three other reasons to keep our oil where it is.

First, there is the stark contrast between California's leadership position on important issues like healthcare and our status as a major petroleum-producing state. Second, there's a need for a large fuel reserve to keep our state's economy robust if

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Re "Prince T A letter to Tr ion Dec 15