

# New Urban News

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## Transportation drives development

Dear President-elect Obama:

There is a "chicken and egg" question many people ask about building the built environment; which comes first, the transportation system or the buildings. This is asked about rail transit in particular. I can now definitively give you an answer to that question: *transportation drives development*. The transportation system a society selects dictates the form of the built environment. The current car/truck transportation system means most US metropolitan areas only have one development option, the familiar drivable sub-urbanism.

Much research has shown that there is now pent up demand for the opposite of drivable sub-urbanism; walkable urbanism, where most of daily needs can be met on foot, bike or by transit. The extra-ordinary price premiums per square foot being achieved for walkable urban development, whether in high density Manhattan, lower density Bethesda in DC or the newly developed Pike Market area in Seattle, shows that people are voting with their feet and pocketbooks for the ability to live and work in mixed-use, walkable places.

However, the bulk of the country is stuck with only a 20th century transportation system, completely car and truck dependent for all residential and commercial transportation. The majority of Americans are stuck with only the drivable sub-urban option for how to live and work.

For the US to become competitive with the market, economic and environmental demands of the 21st century knowledge-based economy, a more balanced transportation system with vastly increased options is crucial...that means more rail, bike and walking options. It also means a national high speed rail system connecting out major metropolitan areas to complement the Interstate Highway system and the national air system.

The 2009 reauthorization of the federal transportation bill is the country's opportunity to put in the 21st century infrastructure we so desperately need. Funding a balanced system, rather than a highway-biased system, will do more than give the people what we want. It will also allow for the development of a way of living and working that is far more energy efficient and far less green house gas emitting. An upcoming Brookings study will show what is intuitively obvious; walkable urban households use about ¼ of the energy and emit ¼ the green house gases of drivable sub-urban households. Encouraging walkable urban development will also make the US far more energy secure, reduce the hundreds of billions of dollars we send to hostile countries abroad and will spark a huge boom in real estate development which will help drive the economy out of our current economic crisis.

The new Obama administration has the opportunity to fundamentally alter how we built the built environment; which accounts for over 35% of our country's assets. The 2009 transportation bill will be the most important domestic legislation of the new century and will put the country on the road to development that is sustainable in so many ways. It is as important to the country from economic, environmental and social perspectives in the 21st Century as the highway and air systems in the 20th Century were. President Obama could preside over transportation legislation as important to the country's future as President Eisenhower's with the building of the Interstate Highway system.

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