Growth requires land use and travel choices

by Gary Barnes

Over the next 25 years, the Twin Cities area is expected to grow by around 500,000 new residents and add probably half that many new jobs. As a result of that growth, the Metropolitan Council is predicting a seven-fold increase in traffic congestion by 2025. It is often claimed that land uses that better support non-automobile modes of travel, such as public transit and walking, can significantly reduce traffic congestion by reducing the amount of automobile travel that new (and current) residents generate. There is considerable literature to support these claims. However, almost all of it suffers from the same fundamental flaw; there is little or no effort to consider alternative explanations. For example, central city neighborhoods are different from suburban ones in almost every way, so to automatically ascribe all observed behavioral differences solely to the style of land development seems biased and unconvincing.

Over the last few years I have been looking at the question of how land use influences travel choices. I looked at historical comparisons, at central city versus suburbs, and at different cities across the U.S, aiming throughout to consider every explanation of travel choices that seem at all plausible. This research led me to be rather skeptical of many of the claims in support of high-density, mixed-use residential development as an answer to our transportation problems.

Travel time, speed, and distance

One common claim is that densely populated areas generate fewer vehicle miles traveled (VMT) per capita than more spread out development. This is true, but misleading. I have found (as have many others) that the amount of time people spend traveling in an average day shows remarkably little variation, no matter what the land use or the transportation system. Differences in VMT arise to a large extent because of differences in average travel speed. The average person spends about 70 minutes traveling on the days he or she travels. Very few locations within the region, and very few other cities, have averages more than five minutes different from this.

A particularly striking point is that this number hasn’t changed for several decades. A previous researcher identified average daily travel times for Twin Cities travelers in 1958 at about 69 minutes. When I did a similar calculation for 1990, it was about 71 minutes. The interstate highway system substantially increased speeds, but apparently people responded by changing home and work locations, and making more trips. It seems to be a common belief that people will take advantage of opportunities to shorten their travel times, but the evidence doesn’t support this. As individual trips get faster, the savings are always used up elsewhere.

Commuting and recreation

There is some variation in average total daily travel times from one place to another. Areas with poor job access have longer average commute times, and this appears to explain all of the variation in total travel times. Daily travel time by non-workers shows hardly any variation from one place to another. The same is true of non-commute travel time by workers, which if anything gets shorter as access worsens. Central city residents have much better access to shopping and other non-work opportunities, both locally and regionally, but again they use the easier access to broaden their choices rather than to...
On March 28, 2000 the Citizens League Board of Directors charged a study committee with examining whether schools can improve high school graduation rates and outcomes for core city youth. In August, the League released the committee’s findings in a report titled: “A Falling Grade for School Completion: We Must Increase School Completion in Minneapolis and Saint Paul”. What follows is a summary of the report. The full report is available at www.citizensleague.net.

The number of students who drop out of high school in Minneapolis and Saint Paul school districts is unacceptably high. Minnesota’s relatively strong statewide graduation rate obscures the crisis occurring in the state’s urban schools. Less than half the students who enter the ninth grade in the Minneapolis public schools graduate within four years. In St. Paul, the picture isn’t much better. Slightly more than 50 percent of all students who enter ninth grade stay in school until graduation day. In today’s world, failing to graduate from high school portends a lifetime of low-level jobs and a lowered standard of living. People without at least a high school diploma are unlikely to earn a family living wage.

Everyone has a stake in increasing graduation rates. A well-educated workforce is vital for the metropolitan area to remain competitive in an economy that demands ever-greater skill levels. The metropolitan region simply cannot afford to abandon so many of its young people to low skill jobs. An economy short on labor is vital for the metropolitan area to develop a system of enhanced compensation and rights for teachers who agree to work in the toughest schools.

The current dismal outcomes on school completion are unacceptable and continuing the status quo threatens the vitality and livability of our community. The public, the Legislature, executive agencies, parents, teachers and administrators all hold the solution for achieving greater school success for students in our core cities. We must do better for our students and our state. Yet schools have a major responsibility in meeting this challenge. Carol Johnson, Superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools said it well when she told the Committee: “If we can’t improve graduation rates, we shouldn’t be in the business.” MJ

City schools fail to make the grade
Study committee reports on school completion rates in Minneapolis and Saint Paul

Lyle Wray

The Minnesota Journal

Fasten your seatbelts, Minneapolis

The Minnesota Journal

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Publisher: 30% address changes to the Minnesota Journal; 708 S. Third St., Suite 500, Minneapolis, MN 55405.

The roller coaster ride of change that took place in the 20th century looks like a seatbelts, Minneapolis. The announcements this month that tie and met new challenges. Minnesota, seniors age 15 and older are the fastest growing population group, in part, because the public’s appetite for big increases in long term care expenditures is simply beyond belief. We are already experiencing chronic labor shortages in the health care professions, and the number of new entrants to the labor market is expected to plummet by about 2010. Of the state’s 5 million residents, approximately 1.3 million are baby boomers eyeing the door to retirement. Headlines often claim that half of the state’s civil service corps will depart within a decade or so. New Minnesotans are also making their presence felt. They are settling both in the metropolitan area and in Greater Minneapolis, and many of their young families with children who are filling the preparedness of local school districts.

Demographic shift is rumbing across the legislative landscape too. The majority of Minnesotans now live in one of the largest metropolitan areas. Political redistricting is likely to result in more legislative representation for the metro, but with a majority of voters now self-identifying as independent, the shift may do little to benefit the established political order.

Sorting through the interplay of demographic changes will be difficult work. Social Security is a cash transfer from current workers to retirees. But the downward trend in the number of entrants into the labor force to pay for retirees’ benefits is very sobering. The current 50 percent school completion rates of ninth graders in the two core cities’ schools might cause some taxpayers to demand a better show for our future workforce.

Despite the wealthy economy, there is little doubt that information, computing and telecommunications technologies are infiltrating all quarters of society, from banking to manufacturing to higher education, and that new technologies are providing greater productivity without a substantial risk of inflation.

The Minnesota Journal September 18, 2001

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The announcement this month that cell phones can be turned into blood cells continues an expected avalanche of developments in human genetics and biotechnology in coming decades. Advances in biotechnology—including nanotechnology—the fabrication of very small machines—are transforming the way we make things. There is no time for complacency in identifying Minnesota as a top 10 state for high technology jobs, and the University of Minnesota as the beneficiary of a record number of patents. The state’s “knowledge economy” won’t wait for laggards. Minnesota must develop a highly skilled workforce and high quality information and traditional infrastructure to enhance our attractiveness as a place to live and invest.

The “Right to Know” for Citizens League’s proposal for a NorthStar Research Coalition to accelerate research and development spending in the state. We must also see to it that more, and not fewer, low-income students go onto postsecondary education. The globalization of production and distribution of goods and services is expanding. As a result, we have lost and are losing a disproportionate number of the local headquarters of Fortune 500 corporations. Maintaining the historically strong sense of corporate engagement in the community could prove to be difficult. Engaging the ever quickening sign of stasis that prevails in the business.

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reduce their total travel time. Part of the point of mixed-use development seems to be that people will reduce their travel by shopping locally; but the evidence doesn’t make me confident that this will happen.

What about transit?

To the limited extent that central city residents spend less time in cars do suburbs, the difference seems to arise from transit. Land use and transit are closely linked. In places where transit is highly developed, the difference seems to be a far stronger determinant of whether suburbanites use transit on a regular basis than do the average suburbanite. The problem is how to make transit convenient enough (and give an additional incentive) to replace the gas tax and other fees with transit fees.

A better way to increase transit usage would be to focus on the work end of the trip; this appears to be a far stronger determinant of transit use than the number of people traveling downtown. And again, the numbers show that suburban residents are not equally served by transit, and almost none could be considered “transit-favorable.”

**Job access and commute times**

Another common belief about land use is the importance of mixing jobs and housing so that people don’t “have to” travel far to work. But as with the other beliefs, the evidence indicates that this may be overstated. The typical resident of the outer suburbs has 1,600 jobs within a mile of home; 9 percent work close to home. In the central city, the average resident has 6,000 jobs within a mile of home, yet just 12 percent work close to home. I found that a broader measure of regional access explained commute times much better; roughly speaking the number of jobs within a 20-minute drive matters much more than the number within walking distance.

It appears that people are willing to substantially restrict their work options in order to have a short commute. The average central city resident has more than 500,000 jobs within a 20-minute drive of home, yet half choose to commute far beyond this. If some of these half-million jobs are good enough and convenient, the difference will be making it more a few into people’s neighborhoods! People with long commutes have made a conscious decision in order to gain some benefit. They are not the victims of bad land use policy.

**Conclusions and policy implications**

I am often asked whether these results, based on 1990 data, will still hold up given the recent increase in congestion. I believe that they will, for two reasons. First, the overarching point of all these beliefs, my research indicates that this would be a much more congested city that is much more congested, and has much higher travel times; roughly speaking, the extra congestion created by construction matters much better; roughly speaking, the extra congestion created by construction is certainly going to be significantly larger in the future no matter what we do. The question is not whether we can prevent it, but what we should do about it. In particular, whether the value of reduced congestion is high enough to justify the necessary investments (especially given the extra creation congestion by construction). Another way to make a solution that might replace the gas tax and other fees with transit fees.

A new Visions is another charter school that has not attracted much newspaper attention, but has attracted educators from throughout the United States. Bob DeKor, a veteran public school educator, designed the school to help young people who have experienced significant problems in traditional schools. Many New Vision’s students have some form of disability. But an outside evaluator found that the average NV student makes 1.5 years worth of progress for every year the student attends the school. New Vision’s students wear uniforms, and the teachers have high expectations. But they also care passionately about the students, and use unusual techniques to help them.

For example, they teach the kind of “mind relaxation” popular in Asia to help students learn how to respond to frustration, not by yelling, screaming or nagging but by relaxing briefly, and then moving on. Many New Visions parents told me last spring that this was the first school project.

**Charters schools learn the ABCs of success**

by Joe Nathan

Are you enjoying your cell phone, and your computer, and your microwave? These are all innovations that have come about because Americans are allowed to be the kind of entrepreneurs that the charter school movement encourages.

Despite the rough press a few charters received this spring, most Minnesota charter schools are reporting higher travel times; this is helping stimulate improvement in schools in this other state. Despite intense opposition from major education groups, in the last decade, we have gone from one charter school in one state, serving less than 100 students, to almost 2500 schools in 37 states, serving over 600,000 young.

**Competition can help stimulate improvement.** In 1996, the Legislative Auditor asked Minnesota high school principals about the impact of the Post- Secondary Options Law. This act allows high school seniors to take college courses at state universities, giving them “opportunities to think, to discuss issues of moral and personal resolve.”

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September finds your editors scurrying around storing up policy acorns

Green Light for Red Light Runners?
Many other cities have reduced accidents and deaths with intensive use of so-called red light runner cameras at busy intersections. In Washington, D.C., for example, before 30 red light runner cameras were installed, drivers running red lights killed 16 pedestrians. In 2000, there were two deaths. Nationally, motorists who run red lights kill about 800 people annually and cameras have cut that death rate in half when they have been installed. In 2001 both Minnesota and Texas voted down legislation enabling red light cameras.-Lyle Wray

Census findings reported by the St. Paul Pioneer Press show that western Wisconsin experienced double-digit housing growth in the 1990s. The increase in housing units in the six counties closest to the Twin Cities ranged from 16 percent in Barron County to 33 percent in St. Croix County.

Coincidentally the Wisconsin Department of Revenue released their annual report of property values on the same day. Not only did the number of households in the area grow rapidly, but the residential property tax values in the six counties referenced by the Pioneer Press ranked in the top 18 in the state. Polk County, ranked fourth statewide, led the way among the six with an increase in property values of nearly 16 percent followed by Burnett (15.3%), St. Croix (14.3%), Barron (13.2%), Pierce (12.7%) and Dunn (12.2%).

Statewide, residential property values in Wisconsin increased by an average of 9.4 percent. The state leaders were Bayfield (on Lake Superior) and Washburn (just west of the Hayward area) with increases of 18 percent for the year. Fifteen of the top 20 counties in terms of residential property values growth are within a two-hour drive of the Twin Cities. Maybe Minnesotans took the 1980s tourism slogan, “Escape to Wisconsin,” too literally. —Phil Jenni

While we’re talking about Wisconsin.
Half of the top 20 Wisconsin counties ranked by property value had labor participation rates “significantly below statewide level” (less than 70 percent). They are largely counties in the northwestern part of Wisconsin, an area noted for recreational and seasonal properties for people from the Twin Cities and for retirees. By and large, these people do not see themselves consuming lots of services that come from the property tax, but their property taxes are going to go up at a faster rate than the rest of the state. Is Wisconsin headed for a property tax revolt led by vacation and retiree homeowners? —P.J.

We’re number 2! According to a new survey, Minneapolis is one of the best places in America for Generation X’ers. “Hot Jobs-Cool Communities” is a survey of America’s “coolest places to live and work” for people aged 20 to 40. The survey is online at www.keepeveryoungtalent.com. It’s the first survey to place equal value on work and life balance by measuring 43 variables, including crime, commute times, farmers’ markets, clubs and musicians. Minneapolis ranked second on the list, right behind San Francisco. Seattle ranked third, followed by Boston and Denver. Rounding out the top 10: Portland, OR, Washington, D.C., Austin, Chicago and Milwaukee. The presence of only two east coast cities suggests that Horace Greeley’s advice still rings true.—P.J.

Getting to Work. Seventy-six percent of Americans 16 years of age or older drive to work alone, according to a report in USA Today (Aug. 22, 2001). Eleven percent park, 5 percent take public transit or walk at home, and 3 percent walk. Makes you wonder how much we could get done with 600 million dollars in incentives to work at home as an alternative to peak hour commuting, instead of building LRT. —L.W.

Not Good Enough on School Completion. The state’s fifth school completion rate study, released August 30, 2001, shows that 78.5 percent of the class of 2000 graduated on time. Although there were slight improvements in the four-year completion rates for Native American and Caucasian students, more African American students dropped out (37.4%) than finished in four years (37%). Although the two core districts are “working on it”, losing 7,015 students per year from high school—mostly in the two core city districts—should not be acceptable. Judging from the second section, last inside page placement of the story in the Star Tribune (Aug. 31, 2001) more public outcry is needed on school completion rates. (View the full report at www.cfl.state.mn.us/datactr/compstu/compstu.htm).—L.W.

As college students begin classes in Minnesota this fall, they may look south to North Carolina and find Minnesota getting beaten at more than just basketball. For example, all 100 counties in North Carolina recently approved a $3.6 billion bond issue to support higher education. "There has always been the highest regard for higher education," according to the President of the Research Triangle Park Foundation, which links companies to research at Duke, N.C. State, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The universities are magnets that attract business clusters and industries into the research park and throughout region.—Michael Raja

“Take Note” contributors include Minnesota Journal and Citizens League staff members.
Welcome

New and returning members

Greg Backlund
Julie Binko
Evelyn Boddy
Lorraine Cannon
Mathew Graham
George Gribble
Noah Heller
William Hempel
James A. Howard
Aaron Mowrey
Al Oertwig
Kaye Rakow
Retchen Sabel
Cindy Toppin
Ron Wirtz
Judy Woodward

Mind-Opener meetings kick-off new season

Throughout much of the year 2000, academics, business people, and civic leaders worried about the future of Minnesota in the new economy. In several well-known reports, Minnesota received mixed reviews as a location for high technology business.

Economic indicators suggested the Minnesota economy was strong, but many feared the state was not doing enough to remain competitive in the long run. The debate reached its peak in the fall of 2000 at the University Summit on Minnesota’s Economy. Following the summit, a working group report provided a list of recommendations to enhance Minnesota as a location for high technology business.

In the aftermath of the internet boom, the debate has subsided and many ideas and recommendations have been placed aside or forgotten. This Citizens League Mind-Opener series provides a second look at where Minnesota stands as a high technology economy and our direction for the future.

What’s Up with Minnesota In the New Economy?

Tuesday, October 2, 2001
Ann Markusen
Professor
Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs

Tuesday, October 9, 2001
Randy Johnson
Hennepin County Commissioner
Co-chair, Great North Alliance

Vance Opperman
Key Investments
Co-chair, Great North Alliance

Thursday, October 18, 2001
Michael Gorman
General Partner
Saint Paul Venture Capital

Tuesday, October 23, 2001
Rep. Dan McElroy (R-Burnsville)
Chair, House Jobs and Economic Development Finance Committee

7:30-8:30 a.m.
$10 members; $15 non-members
(includes a continental breakfast)
The Nicollet Island Inn
95 Merriam, Minneapolis

*The Citizens League began regular policy breakfast meetings in 1962. The Mind-Opener forums, created in 1987 continue at tradition and have become one of the longest running public affairs forums in the country. If you are interested in learning more about issues that matter or want to exchange ideas with business, community and policy leaders, then we invite you to attend. And please bring a guest and introduce them to the Citizens League, too.*
Getting the word out

Only Gary Condit and the State Fair got more news coverage than the Citizens League in August. The release of the school completion report (see the Executive Summary on page two of the Journal) and the election of Dave Durenberger garnered plenty of media attention.

League president Dave Durenberger was Gary Eichten's guest on MPR's midday and League Executive Director Lyle Wray also appeared on the last regular show of Twin Cities Public Television's NewsNight. Both discussed Durenberger's election as president and the implications for the League.

But they turned out to just be the warm-up act for the release of the school completion report on August 20. The report was featured on the front page of the Star Tribune and the lead story of the Pioneer Press' local section. Both major dailies also wrote editorials about the report. Eric Eskola covered the release on WCCO radio. MPR news covered the story and co-chairs George Latimer and Gary Cunningham were interviewed on MPR.

It's not unusual for League study reports to be covered by print and radio journalists. But the school completion study also captured the attention of TV and web sites. The report was the lead story on Channel4000.com, the website for WCCO 4 News and was a "headline" story on KARE 11, KSTP Eyewitness News and KMSP TV.

Lyle Wray was interviewed by Curtis Beckman who does a syndicated radio show for 14 Minnesota radio stations. Wray also shared the report's recommendations with members of the United Way.

Community briefings have also begun. The League believes that the problem can't be fixed until there is widespread agreement that there is a problem. Getting the word out on the issue is the first step in that process.

Energy committee off and running

After several meetings over the summer, the League Energy Committee has settled down to an every other week schedule. Led by co-chairs Ken Keller, director of the Center for Science, Technology and Public Affairs at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, and Andrew Brown, partner at the Dorsey & Whitney law firm in Minneapolis, the committee expects to finish its work in late February.

League members and others interested in the Energy Committee can follow the committee's work at www.citizensleague.net (see below). The site will contain the minutes from previous meetings, articles and information related to the topic, and links to important websites produced by the government, nonprofits and corporations with an interest in energy production and reliability.

Committee members also have their own discussion page; for the password or more information, please contact Scott McMahan at 612-338-0791 or smcmahon@citizensleague.net.

New stuff on the League web site

As you can see by the illustration above, the League has added more information on its web site. There are easy links to study committees, new reports and other new activities of the League. We’ve also added links on the front page to topic areas in which the League has worked over the last 20 years. A list of reports, summary positions and in the case of recent reports, a copy of the report is now readily accessible at www.citizensleague.net. Please stop in for a visit, or a discussion or just to read interesting material.