

## **Gary Lauder's Position on Development in Downtown Menlo Park**

Updated 7/15/14

Since this is the best place on earth to live and work, it's no surprise that others would like to do so too. I too was an immigrant to this area in 1988, so I am sympathetic to the urge to move here. The out-of-control housing prices are partly a result of a lack of development, so adding to our housing supply will help THAT issue. It's an important issue, especially for teachers and other workers who are not earning the salaries of engineers and should not have to live a long commute away. Unfortunately, the housing cost issue is only one issue of several. It is also the case that the SF Bay area has the second worst traffic in the nation...after Los Angeles. So California has the dubious honor of occupying slots 1 & 2.

### **Why not build what's been proposed?**

I always thought that the government would look out for our interests and only allow incremental development that the system can handle. Having driven through downtown Sunnyvale a few years ago, I was shocked to see that the town had allowed tall office buildings to be built right to the property line, thereby creating urban canyons in the middle of this suburb...in some cases right across the street from single-family dwellings. This is proof that perhaps government does not always get it right and prevent inappropriate development...at least from this outsider's perspective. Perhaps they wanted to completely change the character of the area? If Menlo Park wants to do that, it should publicly have that dialog PRIOR to allowing the development. At least Sunnyvale had or created the road infrastructure to support the increased level of traffic.

### **Comparison to Menlo Park traffic.**

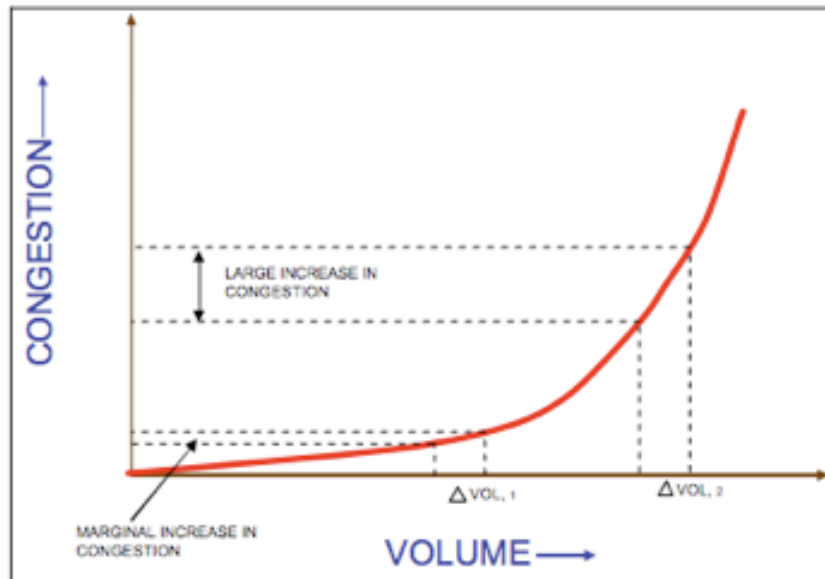
Sunnyvale's downtown is heavily vascularized with arterial roads such as Central Expressway. Even Mathilda Avenue, the street along which the above-mentioned development occurred, has 5 lanes in a single direction (including turning lanes) in places. By contrast, El Camino Real has bumper-to-bumper traffic at both peak commute times and for several hours each. The congestion is not only there, but along all of the roads that provide access to and from 101 & 280. Those roads are not only in Menlo Park, but also in the adjacent towns of Atherton and Palo Alto. A few years ago, during a discussion of whether to install a roundabout in Atherton to alleviate a congested intersection, one of the objections raised by a city council member is that most of the people inconvenienced by the intersection are not Atherton residents (the implication being that we should not invest our scarce funds for others' passing through). This logic is replicated across multiple towns, which is one of the main reasons why we have such awful traffic. Clearly the traffic-alleviation decision-making should be raised to a higher level in the state where it can take into consideration all citizens' interests. Since that is not about to happen, and the 3 towns whose roads service this development have not indicated that they plan to do ANYTHING to alleviate the existing traffic, this raises the issue of how much traffic impact is likely?

There is a plan to do some studies of prospective traffic and mitigation possibilities, but they are far from done. It is absurd to approve this project prior to having completed those. They have only begun them. Here's a sample:

The 3/7/14 Traffic Conformance study on the 500 ECR project cited over 400 net new trips generated during the AM peak hour. That may not sound like a lot, but consider the following: in the kind of traffic which is typical of that time, the 400 cars would stretch over 2 miles if they were in the same lane<sup>1</sup>. Consider that one lane of ECR has a capacity of about 1,200-1,500 cars/hour, and that this is just one development of many to come. The incremental traffic has to be understood in the context of the pre-existing congestion.

### **The non-linearity of traffic congestion**

As additional cars are added to a road or intersection, since the throughput is limited, the congestion (queue) grows in a non-linear way.



**Figure 1: Illustration showing the effect of incremental vehicle volume on congestion.**

From: <http://www.examiner.com/article/why-aaa-is-wrong-about-congestion-and-bike-lanes>  
The same thing happens in communications systems. The roads of the area are already heavily congested, so the additional traffic will materially increase the delays, especially when taken together with the future development of MP's existing vacant lots. See this TED talk for further explanation:

[http://www.ted.com/talks/jonas\\_eliasson\\_how\\_to\\_solve\\_traffic\\_jams](http://www.ted.com/talks/jonas_eliasson_how_to_solve_traffic_jams)

This has several implications:

- 1) minor improvements can have major positive impact
- 2) minor increases in trips can have major negative impact

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<sup>1</sup> 2 miles / 400 cars = 26.4 ft/car => about 10 ft between cars. This is different than the version of this document posted earlier today which only said "over a mile."

- 3) the last ones in have disproportionate adverse impact
- 4) therefore they should bear most of the costs of offsetting THEIR impact.

This project is only the first of many since there are several major undeveloped lots along El Camino Real (and eventually existing structures will get replaced by higher density buildings). It should be assumed that they all will be developed to the max w/o respect to the traffic impact unless the city of Menlo Park deals with this more holistically. Put another way, the incremental traffic and congestion imposed on others is a classic externality (as is pollution). The solution should not be to totally preclude development, but rather to internalize those external costs by imposing Development Impact Fees<sup>2</sup>. In other communities, such fees amount to about \$4,000 per incremental bed for residential units. The cost to developers of this would be a small fraction of their total costs. Since some of the external costs will be borne by the adjacent towns of Palo Alto and Atherton, those fees should be shared with them. It is not the developers' fault that the congestion is such that the curve is becoming vertical, but it is the context that everyone has to deal with, and it appears that it is not being dealt with. The road infrastructure should PRECEDE the development, or at least be planned simultaneously such that the fees can be calculated and included as a condition for approving the development. As it stands, the traffic planning is an afterthought. That means that if such plans ever get completed and executed, it is unlikely to have been paid for by the developers who should rightfully bear their own costs. As a member of the Atherton Transportation Committee, I can attest to the fact that this issue has not come before us.

There are a number of techniques available to improve traffic flows. They include:

- 1) Roundabouts (improves safety, traffic flow at intersection and road throughput),
- 2) Moving on-street parking to off-street, (e.g. by building parking structures)
- 3) Widening roads, dedicated turn lanes,
- 4) Improving the attractiveness of public transit and biking

Until the government develops:

- 1) the wisdom to figure out how to increase road capacity (there ARE ways),
- 2) the will to implement them,
- 3) the resources to implement them (derived from those parties who are bringing the incremental traffic),

then ALL major development should be opposed. This is partly to prevent further erosion of quality of life due to traffic congestion, and partly to get real estate developers to advocate for the proper road upgrades to enable further development. Development is not the problem, congestion, urban canyons and related unintended consequences of it are. I believe that development can and should happen, but only if done with a holistic partnership with enlightened government that uses these

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<sup>2</sup> Under CA's "Mitigation Fee Act" which created Government Code §§ 66000-66025 "...for the purpose of defraying all or a portion of the cost of public facilities related to the development project."

<http://www.impactfees.com/publications%20pdf/short%20overview.pdf>

opportunities to prevent further erosion of our quality of life due to unmitigated congestion. There ARE mitigation possibilities.

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About the author: Gary Lauder is an Atherton resident who has had a lifelong interest in traffic alleviation due to having had too much time to think about it while sitting in it. Some of his views that pertain to this issue are in this TEDx talk: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLK4UlyBVI>, which was a sequel to this: [http://www.ted.com/talks/gary\\_lauder\\_s\\_new\\_traffic\\_sign\\_take\\_turns](http://www.ted.com/talks/gary_lauder_s_new_traffic_sign_take_turns)  
Switching back to the first person: I don't have much bandwidth for engaging in e-mail dialogs on this, but if the spirit moves you, my e-mail can be easily found.