

Dick Spotswood: Growing housing densities is not the way to go greener

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55 COMMENTS

High-density transit-oriented development is touted by regional alphabet agencies and Marin County's Board of Supervisors as an essential strategy to cut greenhouse gas emissions. Statistics contained in the now public draft of Marin County's Climate Action Plan 2014 Update shows those benefits are minuscule.

The action plan's summary of projected greenhouse gas reductions indicates that by 2020, carbon savings from strategies to "promote mixed use, infill and transit-oriented developments" produce 44 metric tons of savings. For comparison, solar installations for "new nonresidential developments" eliminates 23 tons and an aggressive tree planting program could cut another 23 tons of carbon emissions.

If Marin simply planted more trees and mandated solar use on new commercial structures, by 2020 the county would reduce pollutants by slightly more than by any effort to build high-density apartments and condominiums.

The action plan does an excellent job outlining strategies for emissions reductions. It confirms the three most productive tactics when it comes to cutting greenhouse gases.

Topping the list is "expanding community energy efficiency retrofit projects." That alone cuts 5,601 tons of carbon dioxide equivalents. Installing solar on existing homes and apartments eliminates 3,950 tons. Doing the same on existing offices, retail and commercial buildings prevents emission of 3,086 tons of greenhouse gases. Coming in fourth is Marin Clean Energy's green electricity operation, with 2,744 tons avoided.

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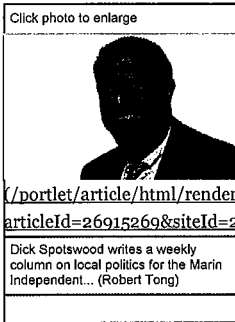
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Together these strategies prevent 15,381 tons of pollutants from being generated within Marin. Compare that with 44 tons saved as a result of proposed community-

destroying so-called transit-oriented construction. Whatever its other benefits, building suburban high-density housing near freeways and SMART have little to do with the environment.

Eliminate their marginal environmental benefits and add in negatives emanating from projects like Corte Madera's much-maligned Tam Ridge Residences at the old WinCup site by Highway 101, and there's a revelation. There are far less disruptive and more environmentally sensitive strategies to build less costly housing.

Instead of high-density complexes next to transit corridors, pursue more-productive and less divisive options. Use innovative tax strategies and fee waivers facilitating second units in residential neighborhoods. Generate more cash for Section 8 rent vouchers for the truly poor. Add small-scale apartments above retail shops in existing downtowns. Permit high-density housing in downtown San Rafael. Greatly expand Marin's skeletal local bus network.



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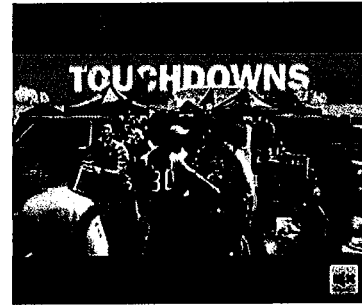
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The draft Climate Action Plan provides a direct path to a more green Marin. It also verifies that one suggested strategy, transit-oriented development, does little to make that a reality.

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It's good to see Boys & Girls Clubs return to Marin. The clubs provide valuable, safe and inexpensive after-school programs and recreation for kids from all demographic groups.

As their website touts, "Program activities focus on five core program areas: Health and Life Skills, Education and Career Development, The Arts, Leadership and Character Development, and Sports, Recreation, and Fitness."

The first new Boys & Girls Club of Marin and Southern Sonoma opened at San Rafael's Davidson Middle School. Next were clubs at Novato's San Jose Middle School and Sausalito Marin City School District's Martin Luther King Jr. Academy. On Sept. 9, the latest club clubhouse opened at Cove School at the old San Clemente campus in east Corte Madera. The next projected site is Corte Madera's Neil Cummins School.

About 600 kids will be enrolled in the after-school programs. Private fundraising is the backbone of clubs' financing, along with \$100,000 from the county and cash from Proposition 49, a 2002 California ballot measure supporting early childhood efforts.

It's all making a real difference for a group of kids many of whom would otherwise be on the streets.

Columnist Dick Spotswood of Mill Valley shares his views on local politics every Wednesday and Sunday in the IJ. Email him at spotswood@comcast.net (<mailto:spotswood@comcast.net>).

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