



Using Walk-Zones to Solve Congestion and Improve Our Communities

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As an Angeleno, I am well rooted in our driving culture. However, in my childhood, our area freeways were uncrowded, gasoline was cheap and street parking abundant. A Sunday drive to the beach was actually a pleasurable family experience and most drivers were patient and courteous. So we all loved our cars.

Nowadays, the world has changed dramatically. High gas prices, congestion and lack of affordable housing, among other things, leave many of us trapped in long daily commutes. For many of us, living closer to where we work or shop is simply not possible and efficient mass transit is not available. So we need to look for other solutions.

So why not try something different? How can we get people out of their cars, while at the same time promoting efficient development, shorter commute times, access to affordable housing, more parks and recreation facilities, efficient mass transit, and the reduction of emissions? I am not an urban planner, but I see all those things being accomplished through the creation of walk-zones.

The idea is simply to designate areas of the city where the use of passenger cars is prohibited. People living, working or shopping in a walk-zone area would have to park their cars in municipal parking structures and walk or take shuttles to their home or other destination.

What would be the benefits of walk-zones? If you take time to think about it, the potential impacts are astounding. Emissions, congestion, gas bills and commute times would

be meaningfully reduced because people living in walk-zones would use their cars less often. Traffic congestion would not exist within the zones, because there would be no cars used inside, only shuttles, freight vehicles and vehicles providing municipal services.

As destination points, walk-zones would also be natural hubs for subway stations or other mass transit, creating a more efficient mass transit system that would promote greater ridership and reduce congestion outside the zones and on the freeways. So traffic congestion would be reduced citywide.

Walk-zones would also encourage more efficient real estate and infrastructure development. Without cars and the attendant traffic and parking problems, higher density housing could be constructed within the zones to help solve problems of urban sprawl and affordable housing. Retail and commercial uses could also be developed to serve the local resident and working population. Neighborhood shops and grocery stores would make a comeback.

Walk-zones would also improve neighborhoods and standards of living as less money is spent on street maintenance and more on improving municipal services. Some of the existing streets themselves could be converted into other uses like greenbelts, parks and recreational facilities that better serve their communities and beautify the neighborhoods. Police could patrol on foot or by bicycle reducing vehicle costs and increasing community based policing. Consequently, crime could be reduced.

Even physical and mental health would be improved. Walk-zones would promote walking and, if redevelopment increased parks and recreational facilities, many other types of exercise. Less traffic congestion and better commute times also translate into less stress and better mental health.

The list of potential benefits goes on and on. Perhaps the most important benefit would be the effect on the communities themselves. Walk-zones could have the effect of creating urban villages where people living and working in an area would naturally interact more and have stronger ties to the community. Stronger citizen involvement would lead to better and safer communities.

The next logical question to ask is where to start. Areas that already have natural shopping districts, commercial zones and mass transportation hubs would perhaps be the best initial candidates. Once the idea has caught on, thought could be given to the next generation of areas that could be developed or redeveloped into walk-zones. However, ultimately this decision must be left to city and regional planners and the political process. Hopefully, city officials will engage in lively public debate about creating walk-zones and through this debate communities will be encouraged to participate and promote themselves as candidates based on their relative merits.

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