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perspective

Urban sprawl drives up the cost of living

By State Rep. Claire Levy

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As Americans struggle with the high cost of gas, political debates rage over allowing more drilling to ease the burden.

One way to reduce the burden of high gas prices has largely been overlooked. We can dramatically reduce the amount we drive by smarter land-use planning.

American households are driving 4,400 more miles per year than they otherwise would drive due to low- density development patterns. Over the past 25 years, the number of miles each of us drives has grown three times faster than the growth of the U.S. population. In Colorado, the number of miles driven annually per driver increased from 10,900 in 1980 to 14,340 in 2005, a 31 percent increase per driver.

The driving force behind this increase is sprawl: low-density, single- use development that is disconnected from other types of development. It is simply not possible to avoid driving long distances when housing developments are located far away from basic community services such as shopping, schools, medical facilities and employment centers.

Sprawl has other deleterious consequences, too:

• That extra 4,000 miles per capita on top of population growth has contributed to the $1.5 billion annual shortfall in transportation funding.

• Families who were urged to "drive 'til you qualify" so they could buy a home now devote up to 60 percent of their household income to housing and transportation.

• For the elderly, suburban development patterns often require moving out of their homes when they can no longer drive.

• The decline in walking brought on by suburban land use patterns contributes to the increase in obesity.

• The cost to extend water and sewer lines, construct and maintain roads, and provide public safety and emergency services to low-density development places a financial strain on municipal and county budgets.

While we are seeing the first decline in driving since the oil embargo of the '70s, in response to the price at the pump, the average person can reduce their driving by only a small amount, since it is impossible to get to work, school, church or shopping centers without a lengthy drive.

According to the Urban Land Institute, demand is strong for transit-friendly development. Those with the financial means are abandoning remote subdivisions in favor of urban centers. It is tempting to assume, based on this information, that the market will take care of the problem.

Unfortunately, the market alone is not sufficient. There is a host of hidden subsidies for sprawl and impediments to smarter growth.

• State transportation planning and funding

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policies reward new-auto dependent development by burdening existing taxpayers with the tab for congestion relief.

• Zoning laws often do not allow compact mixed use development.

• Reliance on sales tax to fund municipal services puts municipalities in competition with one another and creates an incentive to expand.

• State annexation laws facilitate leap-frog development in search of sales tax revenue.

• The ease of forming special taxing districts offers developers tax-exempt financing to build infrastructure for raw, rural land, making infill development within existing communities more costly.

• Cities and counties are not using their authority to charge impact fees, which removes the incentive to develop in locations where the impacts are minimized.

• The absence of regional planning or statewide planning goals pits municipalities against one another and fosters redundant services.

It has been a decade since Colorado seriously considered its land-use, annexation and tax policies. Declining property values, the cost of gas, the burden on taxpayers, and the drain on our transportation funds requires that we put the topic back on the front burner.

Coloradans want to leave their cars at home. Let's design our communities to make that possible.

State Rep. Claire Levy represents House District 13, located in Boulder, Gilpin and Clear Creek counties.