

7. Cumulative Impacts

Commercial projects are evaluated on an individual basis, without looking at the cumulative impact on intersections, traffic and spillover parking in neighborhoods. Many traffic studies seem to have a finding of “no impact,” yet traffic continues to get worse. What changes in the way we evaluate projects would you favor?

Stewart Carl:

Impact studies must be realistic, and must take into consideration cumulative impacts. Special attention must be paid to fragile systems like roads where even a small increase in load can precipitate a huge impact like gridlock. Design of parking schemes should be robust and designed to accommodate the maximum load that it could be expected to receive, not just the average (or less).

Leonard Ely III:

I don't have a one answer fits all answer to this. I would favor having developers participating in traffic mitigation measures but this would be predicated on the size and scope of the project. I don't think that a build should be built in certain areas without adequate parking.

Adrian Fine:

I support cumulative impact studies, and I have repeatedly called for them on projects that come before the Planning Commission. I believe we need to make “traffic impact” a standard for development. Vehicle Miles Travelled (VMT) is useful for reducing overall traffic, but Level of Service (LOS) is also important to evaluate traffic at specific intersections/thoroughfares.

As a bicyclist, I am particularly interested in multi-modal level of service (MMLOS), which measure impacts for cars, bikes, pedestrians, and other roadway users.

John Fredrich:

I support honesty and good data in regard to traffic studies. I am not a fan of ‘counter-intuitive’ approaches. I thought Joe Kott, Gail Likens, and Jaime Rodriguez did not know what they were doing or were dishonest in how they did it.

Arthur Keller:

I successfully fought on the Citizens Advisory Committee on the Comprehensive Plan Update for projects to supply sufficient parking to meet demand.

I successfully fought to retain the Level of Service metric for local traffic congestion in addition to the State mandated metric of Vehicle Miles Traveled (which promotes shorter commutes even if local traffic congestion increases). When the Stanford Medical Center expansion was being reviewed, somehow Menlo Park had more intersections that would be affected than Palo Alto. Why is that? Because Menlo Park's rules about measuring traffic congestion are stricter than Palo Alto's. (Although Menlo Park does not seem to be enforcing them for Facebook.) I

successfully fought for Palo Alto to revisit the traffic congestion standards to make them stricter. I will fight to revise these standards to make them stricter, even though there is opposition.

There is a problem with the baseline used to compare the existing traffic conditions with that of the new development. The current baseline for prior traffic conditions from a project assumes that the prior development is fully occupied at its highest possible use (even if that exceeds what the building ever generated). I want the baseline to be the actual traffic load measured no longer than two years prior to the submission of the project proposal. With the baseline being inflated by theoretical high use, it is not surprising the traffic studies find “no impact” in comparison.

With the adjustments to traffic impact rules I propose, Palo Alto will have an effective tool to control traffic growth from new developments.

Liz Kniss:

I am open to modifications to our evaluation process or consider using another company/methodology. The question is an important one. On a broader level, our comprehensive plan and area plans should focus more on systems thinking about how the totality of development, jobs, school commutes etc., contribute to traffic.

Lydia Kou:

The statement that they don't look at cumulative impacts is misleading – the problem is in how they look at cumulative impacts. Traffic is the best example. The first part of the problem is that there has been a long history of minimizing the size of the problem. For example, the applicant can use a traffic study during an economic downturn as "normal". They can ignore the traffic that will be produced by projects already approved, being built and not yet occupied. They can make unrealistic assumptions about the occupants – for example, the assumption was that the Arbor Real housing project would have very few children (children result in more vehicle trips per household).

The second part of the problem is how you assign responsibility. Consider the situation where anything under 1% increase is regarded as "insignificant". When you look at a major arterial like El Camino, even a major development such as Arbor Real is judged to have insignificant impact. Similarly, the Stanford Industrial Park is not a single property, but a collection of parcels owned by various entities (such as trusts). Consequently, improvements in each rarely have a "significant" impact on Page Mill or the I-280 interchange. The original zoning should have taken into account the carrying capacity of the street, so you might think that if a property gets up-zoning, it should pay for the impacts. But it isn't that simple. A different occupant can generate different levels of traffic and at different times. Consider two properties that replaced their original buildings and stayed within the original zonings: If you charge impact fees based upon the level of congestion when the building was replaced, is that fair to the property owner who waited. And might you not be encouraging the premature replacement of buildings (carbon footprint and waste stream).

Danielle Martell:

DID NOT RESPOND

Don McDougall:

I favor following the law and analyzing cumulative impacts.

Greer Stone:

Too often developers promise mitigated, or no impact, from their developments, and then we are left with more clogged streets and dearth of parking after it is built. I would require the developer to pay for, and conduct, a study on the various impacts their development will have. After the study is complete, they will have to sign an affidavit swearing to its accuracy.

We must also ensure we evaluate projects on quality, just as much as quantity. There must be clear standards so that neither the developer, nor city staff, has to waste years and countless dollars proposing a plan that was illegal from the beginning. The one thing I find most critical in any decision by council, or any evaluation of a project, is to receive the input from the community members who live near the proposed project. I would promote the creation of standing neighborhood committees whose job it would be to report to Council, or the Planning and Transportation Commission, regarding the neighborhood's concerns over the project. It is the people living in the neighborhoods who best understand what is best for their community. Council should represent the will of the people, and neighborhoods, who voted for them.

Greg Tanaka:

1. I object to the traffic methodology of Santa Clara County, and would champion its change to the more "real time" model of San Mateo Council where mitigating impact has better measurement tools.
2. Commercial projects do have some cumulative impact mitigations, but they are incorporated in the outdated 1998-2000 Comprehensive Plan—THIS MUST BE UPDATED to secure new measurements and identify mitigations.
3. I support area focus plan as are used in Menlo Park and Mountain View. This means that after the Comp Plan is updated, we focus on areas like California Avenue, downtown, West Palo Alto (Barron Park) with specific plans that identify and secure local services like grocery stores, identify traffic impacts and mitigations strategies making these plans more certain for the local neighborhood and broader community.